

13. Non-Conversions of Elymas, Felix, and Agrippa—Acts 13, 24, 26

This lesson addresses three examples of people who heard the gospel but failed to obey it. These examples of non-conversion in Acts are the last lesson of this series called *The Great Commission and the Conversions in Acts*. In the previous lessons, we saw the gospel fall on good and honest hearts, and the people who heard the gospel believed the gospel and obeyed the gospel. What happened when the gospel message fell on hard hearts? This lesson explores three examples of people who were not converted: a sorcerer in Acts 13; Felix, a governor in Acts 24; and Agrippa, a king, in Acts 26.



Elymas, A child of the Devil, Rejects the Gospel

In Acts 13:1-12 the church at Antioch, following the instruction of the Holy Spirit, sent Paul and Barnabas on what was to become known as Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). Paul and Barnabas went down to Seleucia and sailed for Cyprus, arriving at Salamis. In what was to become a custom, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues; thus fulfilling the Lord's command in the Great Commission to preach the gospel (Acts 13:4-5). The scripture gives the following account of their experience:

Acts 13:6-12: *6 They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, 7 who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. 8 But the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. 9 Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 10 "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? 11 Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."*

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. 12 When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

This episode of conversions centers on two very different men. One Bar-Jesus, is a sorcerer and false prophet, also called Elymas. The other man was a proconsul, named Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who wanted to hear the word of God. Elymas opposed Paul and Barnabas and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Paul, speaking and full of the Holy Spirit, look straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?" Paul's language draws a straight line between the children of God and the children of the devil. A child of the devil is also an enemy of everything that is right. Jesus himself had used this same language to describe disobedient people, when in John 8:31-32, he spoke to Jews who were believers, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Even though these Jews believed, they would not obey him. In John 8:42-44, Jesus uses clear language to call them children of the devil: "Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. 44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him." In Gal 1:6-8, Paul tells us the penalty for perverting the truth:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people

are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

Why did not Elymas obey the gospel? He was the child of the devil, the enemy of everything that is right, full of deceit and trickery, and one who perverted the truth.

Felix Never Found a Convenient Time to Obey the Gospel

Acts 24:17-27 *"After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. 18 I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. 19 But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. 20 Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin – 21 unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: 'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'"*

22 *Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." 23 He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.*

24 *Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." 26 At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.*

27 *When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.*

In the context of this passage, Paul had made his defense to Felix, the Roman governor; and Felix, the governor, had adjourned his case, deferring it until the coming of Lysias. In the meantime, Felix who was well acquainted with the way, sent for Paul in order to listen to him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. Felix, therefore, understood the way of Christ clearly. Paul's discourse included righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. Felix was afraid (some versions say terrified). Felix's response characterized procrastination as he said, "When I find it convenient, I will send for you." Many today are seeking a more convenient season to obey the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus had confronted Jews who believed on him with the very same attitude as Felix. John recorded in John 12:42-43: "Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved praise from men more than praise from God."

There is no indication in the scriptures that Felix ever found a convenient time to obey the gospel. Perhaps, he, as some of us, failed to recognize the urgency of obeying the gospel to save his eternal soul. Paul wrote in 2 Cor 6:2, "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

King Agrippa Was Never Persuaded to Obey the Gospel

Acts 26:19-30: 19 *"So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. 21 That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22 But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – 23 that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."*

24 *At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."*

25 "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26 The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

29 Paul replied, "Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

30 The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. 31 They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment."

The setting for this episode is Paul's defense before King Agrippa. Paul had rehearsed his conversion with the King in Acts 26:1-18. The above scripture comes after Paul's summary to Agrippa of how he presented the gospel. He starts by saying, "I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." Paul said that this was why the Jews seized him and added, "That the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles." Porcius Festus had followed Felix as the governor of the province; and upon hearing what Paul told Agrippa, shouted, "You are out of your mind, Paul! "Your great learning is driving you insane." Paul turned immediately to Agrippa, saying that he knew Agrippa believed the prophets. Agrippa responded, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul answer that he wished that those who were listening would be like him. There is never a record of Agrippa's obeying the gospel. In fact, Agrippa often is described as one who was almost persuaded to become a Christian. The King James Version quotes Agrippa as saying in Acts 26:28, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

It is possible to be convinced that something is true and not act on it. Paul said, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." That Agrippa was convinced seems apparent. Yet he did not act. Many honest people know the truth and fail to act on it. Such seems to be the case with Agrippa.

How different is Agrippa from those in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost when those hearers were cut to the heart. Peter's persuasion on that day led thousands to obey the gospel: "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." Acts 2:40-41.

Conclusion

This 13-lesson study has shown the teaching of Christ when he gave the Great Commission. The numerous cases of conversion in the book of Acts show the apostles carrying out the commission exactly as the Lord commanded. The cases also show that good and honest people obey the word of the Lord accurately and in every regard. However, the three examples of non-conversion show the three reasons people, then and now, fail to respond. Some, like Elymas, are just too wicked and greedy to give their lives to Christ. Others, like Felix, are looking for a more convenient time; even the fear and terror of the judgment will not move them. Still others, like Agrippa, are seeking more and more persuasion, even though they already know what to do to be saved.

Study Questions

1. Compare the conversion of Elymas the sorcerer with that of Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8).

2. Compare Felix's conversion with that of Paul (Acts 22). _____

3. Compare the conversion of Agrippa with that of the hearers in Acts 2. _____
