

John Barnes

They ministered to the Lord and fasted

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Acts 13:2

When Paul undertook his own service as God's apostle it was as no novice, but as one who had passed through deep experiences, alone with God. His laborious and extensive service had a foundation of secret history, and this can easily be discerned in the quality of his ministry. Immediately prior to Barnabas and Saul being openly set apart for the service of God to which they were called by the Holy Spirit, they were serving helpfully in the assembly at Antioch. But there is also a feature of their inner service which is clearly noticed. They were in the secret place of sanctuary service, along with other servants of the Lord in that place: "They ministered to the Lord and fasted."

No doubt they were a valuable aid to the local brethren, but the Holy Spirit notices these secret dealings. We recall the Lord's answer to His disciples when they were disappointed at their lack of power to help the poor demon possessed lad: "This kind goes not out but by prayer and fasting." These servants at Antioch knew the truth of this in their work. When they moved out of that quiet retreat into the public service of the Lord with its turbulent results, they carried with them the power generated in the secret place. Paul disturbed people wherever he went. It was not because he was disorderly or provocative, but the truth he had taken in during his private dealings with the Lord was so revolutionary that he, and those who served with him, were accused of turning the world upside down. The truth is, as bro. F. B. Hole once shrewdly remarked: "They were trying to turn it right side up."

The Lord Jesus had His disciples with Him in the secret of His own companionship before He sent them out to serve. Mark tells us that the Lord Jesus “appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). Each of these lives had its “and,” dividing its secret history and its public service, a kind of vestibule from one into the other. There could be no usefulness in the Lord’s service without such experience. No doubt the principle is continued throughout the servant’s life and service: “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). The constant outpouring demands a continual infilling. Even the Lord Jesus, in His life of service, felt the need of withdrawing into the calm presence of the Father. He was continually withdrawing from labor to give Himself to prayer and communion (compare Luke 5:16, where the Greek construction is said to indicate that it was His practice to do so). If He, the perfect Servant, needed these periods of retirement, how much more do we need them.
