

## Disagreements and Division Acts 15:36-41

We come to the end of this chapter. It looked like there was going to be a theological division of massive importance in this chapter, and that was over the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ — the nature of salvation itself. And some prize unity at all costs. But some division and disunity is actually good. If someone is teaching against some vital doctrine related to our salvation then there has to be a clear division between what is right and what is wrong. And no doubt for some of the Judaizers they had gone too far and added certain works of the Mosaic law as absolutely necessary for salvation.

Paul says quite clearly in Galatians 1:8-9, **“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”** That is strong language. Let them be damned. It is not joining hands and singing cumbya. There is a clear demarcation between truth and error. Individuals eternal welfare is at stake as far as what is preached and what they believe. This is not the gospel, and therefore there is a sharp division between truth and error.

And I think we all know that. But by far the divisions which occur in the church of Jesus Christ itself are not trivial in nature. They are interpersonal. They are of such a nature where there is friction and division between members in the congregation. And many times when we are not watching our hearts, what is in our hearts starts to manifest itself. We start to so-call share things about another person. And this sharing has nothing to do with reconciliation but just getting others to agree how we have been mistreated or sinned against. That sharing leads to anger. That anger leads to division. The division now grows not just between me and the other person but others have joined. The way they viewed the person before they now view him or her differently. And the problem is three-fold. One is that the other person is never involved. He or she has never shared their story or have been allowed. Things are never just one sided.

The second thing is that there isn't an attempt for reconciliation. There is much effort put into not just looking at the other person's sin but not looking at your sin. There are always two sinners in the room. And our sin no matter how little we think it is — is done against our great God and his worth and glory. The last thing is the testimony of Christ is diminished. How can we preach a message of reconciliation between us and God when we refuse to be reconciled with others in our lives? It is incredible how often the church is destroyed not by the outside — persecution and opposition — but inside, by the church acting more like the world than like Jesus Christ. Some times in this life being reconciled with others is impossible. We are open and long for it but others either walk away, cut you out, or just want nothing to do with you. But if we are members of the same body, if Christ has redeemed us then we ought to even bring others into our lives to help us be reconciled.

In this passage again, we have two good men who have a sharp disagreement, and it is contentious. It even says it in the text. And this is not so much a theological problem in this section as a practical problem of what to do with another individual. And as we look at this passage it really causes us to look at our own lives and our own

relationships. Relationships are hard and difficult. And we all have trying relationships. You can think about some you have right now. But here is the thing, the ones that can cause the most heartache in your life and the most damage to the testimony of Christ are the relationships that are meaningful and closest to us. This is when our emotions rather than our theology can take over.

And where do you have strained relationships? Where are the relationships in your life not what they should be? Where are you even refusing or tempted to cut people out of your life? I want us to look at this passage of Scripture and learn that we ought to seek to resolve conflicts in our lives. I want us to keep God's glory as absolute. And there are godly ways to resolve conflict and minister even to my opponent who really is not my opponent. We need to be more suspicious of our own heart than others. So let's look at this division, and then how it is resolved.

1. We need to recognize divisions will come in our lives. Vv. 37-39a.

It is inevitable that divisions come. They are part and parcel of living in this fallen world. None of us can escape it. And I know we as the people of God should know better but we are all still in that process of being conformed into the image of Christ, and that process in case you have not noticed is not complete in us. And if these two men can have a sharp disagreement then we have to realize that we are not above or beyond that. And the amazing thing is they both want something good. They both want God to be glorified, people to come to Christ, and believers strengthened in Christ. There is a sharp disagreement about what to do with Mark. And often we can think and justify anger and hostility against another because we have some good end or intention in mind.

But I can remember Paul David Tripp saying, "**A good thing becomes a bad thing when it becomes a ruling thing.**" And you can tell if it is a ruling thing in our heart by what comes out. A father that shouts that all he wants is peace and quiet. Nothing wrong with wanting peace and quiet, but this is a ruling god when anger comes out. The teen who is frustrated by his parents lack of trust treats them in a way he should not. The wife who gives her husband the silent treatment because of some bone headed thing he said. Something else rather than Christ and his gospel is controlling them. And they are blind to it because they actually want a good thing. They want peace, trust, and love. But they want that good thing above honouring, glorifying, and obeying God. They want it above even reconciliation.

So look at the problem because both Barnabas and Paul want something good. Look at verse 37, "**Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.**" Now think of who Barnabas is. He is the uncle of John Mark. He realizes that Mark left both Paul and Barnabas and went back to Jerusalem. He didn't seem ready for the rigours of the missionary life. But Barnabas realizes that God can do extraordinary things in our hearts and lives. Just because lack of faith he certainly isn't abandoned to uselessness or fruitlessness for the rest of his Christian life. Certainly his sin and feebleness do not rise to the level of some sins that take pastors out of the ministry. And Barnabas has hope for this young man. He now knows what to expect. His heart and life have matured, and he would be a valuable asset to take with them, and he can learn and certainly grow. After all we are training the next generation.

But look at the next verse and the response from Paul, **“But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.”** We realize that after the ministry in Cyprus where Paul confronted the sorcerer Elymas, and they set sail to go to the region of Galatia we read in Acts 13:13, **“Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.”** And there is no information given to us in chapter 13 of why he left. We might have concluded that he was sent on a mission by Paul and Barnabas and nothing was amiss, if we didn’t have this passage. Here we see he had withdrawn and left the work. It might have been too much, more suffering and heartache than he could have imagined. The opposition and the long days walking. Some estimate that Paul walked more than twenty miles a day when he went from place to place. Ministry is hard and gruelling. There are so many blessings — glorious blessings, but the hardships can be and are excruciating. There is also opposition everywhere you go. Many get into ministry not realizing the hardship and opposition that goes along with it.

Paul sees taking John Mark along as a detriment. There is just too much at stake. He can maybe be useful to the church at Antioch or even Jerusalem but certainly not in this mission venture. I mean think of what awaits Paul in the next chapter — he and Silas will be beaten and put in prison. This will be too much for John Mark, and we just cannot carry out what God has for us with him in tow, constantly worrying about him.

Now when you think about how they both thought, you can see Barnabas’ side and understand him wanting to take his cousin, to mature this young man. You can understand Paul not wanting to risk it. This is not theological but the method of what is best for the mission. But look at the beginning of verse 39, **“And there arose a sharp disagreement.”** Now notice a couple of words here. One is the word “arose.” It speaks of something bubbling up, something happening and arising that was not there before. And the second word in the Greek is interpreted with two words and that is “sharp disagreement.” And the meaning here is that it was heated. This was not you go your way and I will go my way kind of thing, but something of an intense and emotional nature. And again, along with the word “arose” this is something that did not exist before. They shared so much together, having served side by side for years. Barnabas had gotten Paul from Tarsus and brought him to Antioch, and they served preaching and testifying of Jesus in places that never heard the name Christ. They had been persecuted together, and been through so much. This was an intense division and no doubt painful one. This was not good.

And think of it, because where can those words be written over our lives, **“And there arose a sharp division.”**? Where are some of the relations in my life not what they are supposed to be? When our emotions become the centre of our thinking it is amazing where they will take us. And now doubt it was calm and cool when it began. These were two mature men. Paul, “let’s go again Barnabas!” “Sure, Paul, but let’s take Mark along. He has grown so much in the Lord.” “Praise God he has, but this mission is too tough. He is just not ready. There are others that we can take. Maybe another time.” “No Paul, I really believe he is ready. He has a willing heart and really wants to learn and be used of the Lord.” “No Barnabas, he failed us once and we cannot afford

him failing us again.” “Paul, we need to take him!” We are not taking him Barnabas!. We are! We are not. Well, if that is the way you are going to be you go your way and I’ll go mine! Fine! Fine!

Can you here the temperature go up? What has happen? Even in the best of us a good thing can become a bad thing when it becomes a ruling thing. Divisions so often come in our hearts and in our lives, not because of the other person, but because of what is going on in our heart. James 4:1, **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”** Where do sharp divisions originate? We so often want to blame the other person — it is Barnabas, it is Paul, but Scripture doesn’t let us get away with it. It is arises in the sinfulness of our hearts. And sin is so subtle that it will argue for our righteousness. I want a good thing! Where in your life are your passions warring? Where is it causing rifts and quarrels that ought not to be there? Today is the day of repentance. Today is the day of trusting Christ and living out the gospel of reconciliation.

## 2. We need to see the lessons we can learn from divisions. Vv. 39-41

One of the lessons we can learn is that divisions can be costly. We see it right here as two men that no doubt loved one another went there separate ways. Now it might be that they did decide amicably that they could not agree and so they went in different directions and sought to glorify God. But there is not much to really to support that in the text. We are told that there was a sharp disagreement and that is the reason they separated from one another. And the key there is not so much Paul separated from Mark but that he separated from Barnabas. That is the cost here. Now I really do not think they became enemies, but it is amazing that family members, church members, or close Christian friends because of some disagreement can be considered enemies in our thoughts, words, and actions.

We see Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus. This would be a great mission ground for him. He was from Cyprus and they had already started a mission on the island during their first mission trip. Paul went to Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the church that had already been established for the glory of Christ. He took Silas with him who must have arrived back from Jerusalem. Also on this trip were Timothy and the writer of this letter, Luke. We will see them appear in the next chapter.

But what are some lessons we can learn from this episode? I think for many it is trying to decide who was right and who was wrong. And for many they side with Paul. After all, Paul is sent with the blessing of the church in this passage. The rest of the book of Acts details his journey and certainly we can see our Lord was with him. God even used him after this time to write the majority of the New Testament. So even though we do not have more details in the passage, many come to the conclusion that Paul was on the right side and Barnabas was on the wrong side.

But we realize that in personal disputes it is not usually that cut and dry. And the thing we have to realize is that God uses us in spite of ourselves. It is not because we are worthy or we have reached some sort of status in his sight. Paul, along with every other believer living back then are the same as those living today. We are all flawed. We are all in the process of being changed but none of us have been perfected. When we are in disputes with others many times it is hard to see our sin. And Paul knew that he was not free from sin. He realized Jesus was still perfecting his image in us. 1 Timothy

1:15, **“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”** Notice he doesn’t say, “I was the foremost of sinners,” but “I am the foremost.” he realized sin still was in his heart. And even when we are blind to some things like our pride, self-righteousness, and even sinful attitudes toward others, it is amazing how God still uses us. Paul goes on and says in 1 Timothy 1:16, **“ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.”** This is the incredible thing. The reason why Paul made any advances in his life, the reason why God even used him in the midst of sin being worked out of him is because of the glorious mercy of God. And I believe the more we see God use us in spite of us, the more we see our sin, and truly turn from it. The more we are willing to look at ourselves and seek to change in Christ. Paul does really care about both Barnabas and Mark.

There is another lesson here, and that is to never give up on others, whether we have a disagreement, we should always leave the door open and keep seeking reconciliation, and we should never give up on others who have failed or sinned against us thinking they can never be used of the Lord or the door is shut forever. After we pass from this chapter, Barnabas the encourager is never mentioned in the Book of Acts again. And you would think that was the end of the story. But listen to 1 Corinthians 9:5-6, **“Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?”** This is in the context of a labourer being worthy of his pay. But what it is when he includes himself and Barnabas is the approval of the ministry of Barnabas. He saw whatever Barnabas was doing after they parted as honouring to the Lord. It is so easy to vilify others who we disagree with, and it can go so far as even doubting whether someone is saved or not. And yet God uses us and them. Do we pray for our opponents? Do we pray that not only they might be reconciled to us but be used for the glory of Christ? God not only reconciled both these men but used them in extraordinary ways.

Another lesson deals with John Mark. I think so often we give up on others. We think they have gone too far, blown too many opportunities and can never be used of God. They have been put on the shelf by God never to be used again. Many young people get that message from their parents. In the parent’s frustration comes a message that you are such a disappointment and you will never amount to anything. You are done. But I am here to announce that God has chosen to use the worthless and those who have failed and those who are nothing and those who are broken and those who have blown it that ultimately all the glory goes to him. This is incredible if you think that Paul’s relationship with John Mark is done because of his departure and the agony it caused, and now the rift between him and Barnabas, because listen to Colossians 4:10-11, **“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.”**

Here Mark identifies with Paul when he was in prison, and here Paul says of these men, including Mark, “they have been a comfort to me.” Here Mark has a definite ministry in the life of the apostle Paul. Incredible the grace of God in Mark’s life. Now listen to what Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:11, “**Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.**” This is right at the end of Paul’s life before he is executed. He knows he has finished his course. And who does he want with him who will comfort him as he walks through the valley of the shadow of death? None other than Mark. And then think of it, God would use this very man to write the Gospel of Mark! How extraordinary is God’s grace!

Richard Phillips writes, “**No Christian is beyond hope of recovery. No matter how bad the fall may be, there is a road back to usefulness. John Mark is not doomed to live out a second-rate Christian life, never to experience the smile of God’s approval on his ministry ever again. Think about it: God would choose him to write one of the Gospels. This does not justify what he did at Pamphylia—not at all! But God forgives repentant sinners, and so should we.**”

And he is absolutely right. If you are a young person here, and you have blown it God can take your life and not only change it, but use your life marvellously in the lives of others. And this should teach all of us to keep short accounts, not to give up on others or limit what God can do with others. God’s grace is so great in our lives. And all of us should be thankful that he has chosen to use broken and such unpromising vessels like Mark, like you, and like me, so that all the glory goes to him. Don’t let your grievances against others limit what God can do.