



God's Goodness in the Midst of Strife

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 15:36-41

June 29, 2014

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-Read Acts 15 with concentration on verses 36-41

-“And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” (Acts 15:36–41, ESV)

-Pray

-Intro: Let's review to get us to our passage today. Some men had come to Antioch from Judea and were teaching that circumcision was needed in order to be saved. In other words, salvation was Christ plus something else. Christ wasn't enough but something else was needed in addition to what Christ had done on the cross. Paul and Barnabas vehemently disagreed and went to the Jerusalem elders about the issue. They are meeting and Peter stands up and basically says to his Jewish brothers that God has given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as He had with the Jews and that the Jews didn't have any right to add a yoke to their salvation by keeping the law that even they haven't been able to keep. His conclusion was that the Gentiles and Jews were saved in the same way---by the grace of the Lord Jesus. The assembly fell silent, Paul

and Barnabas shared the amazing ways in how God was moving among the Gentiles and then James spoke. God is saving a people for His name and this includes the Gentiles. James came to this conclusion.

-“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.” (Acts 15:19–20, ESV)

-Basically, James agrees that we are all saved by grace alone in Christ alone. And unity in the church, the only one true church, is serious. It would have been easy for there to be a Jewish church and a Gentile church but that is not the heart of God and that is not the heart of the apostles. That’s why James some instructions for the Gentiles. This is so that the church would respect the convictions of others and not bring needless offense. Unity in the church was a big deal.

-And so this was a big deal. The gospel of justification by faith alone is preserved. So they sent men from Jerusalem with a letter explaining this and when this is shared with the church it was great encouragement.

-“So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” (Acts 15:30–35, ESV)

-The church was encouraged! Why wouldn’t they be? The church was one and they were a part of it by the grace of Christ in saving them! We should all be encouraged that we are a part of the one true church of God.

-So Paul and Barnabas remain there and they are teaching and preaching the word of the Lord and all is good and unity is great. AND THEN we come to our passage today. Paul and Barnabas have a disagreement and split and go their separate ways. This is unimaginable but it happened. And because it did we can see some things that will be helpful to us. First:

1 – Paul and Barnabas Had Hearts for Discipleship (36)

-“And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”” (Acts 15:36, ESV)

-Do you see the heart of Paul and Barnabas here for the church---for those who had heard and received the gospel and are in Christ? Paul wanted to go where they had proclaimed the word of the Lord and to see how these people were doing. Let’s go see how they are and Barnabas wanted to go too because he wanted to take Mark along. Let’s go see how they are. Let’s go see how they are growing in Christ. Let’s go spend some time with them and disciple them and see how they are being sanctified. Paul saw his responsibility as not only proclaiming the gospel but also to help mature the new converts in their faith. This was not a one and done for Paul. He loved these people as spiritual children. And Paul wanted to build mature believers not spiritual infants. Paul knew that if they would mature in Christ then they would reproduce the same. That’s what Christ has called us to do---make disciples. Paul says,

-“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Colossians 1:28, ESV)

-This was their heart. This is not always easy---it’s sometimes very hard because it requires hard things to be said and done. But Paul was willing to pour himself out---to spend and be spent for their souls. Paul had a heart for the church. He cared for it deeply, corporately and individually.

-See the heart of love for these people. A heart of love for another wants them to grow in Christ. A heart of love wants to see others more conformed into the image of Christ and growing in their desires for our Savior. A heart of love wants to spur others on to know Christ as we know Him and to pursue Him as we do. A heart of love wants to see others complete in Christ. This should be our hearts beloved. Christ has told us to go and make disciples and to teach them. This should be our desire.

-And our desire to do this is rooted in our desire for the gospel. First, to be constantly amazed at God's grace to us personally in saving us in Christ. Just stop and think of the miracle of your own salvation. And second, to share this good news with others and desire to see them know Christ as we do and be mature in him. Paul's heart for the church was rooted in Paul's heart and love for Christ and for the gospel and to share it. Paul said, Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Cor 9:16). And we see God bless that desire---what begins as a follow-up visit to these areas already evangelized became, under the Spirit's direction, a full-scale missionary journey that would take them into Macedonia where churches were established in places like Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth.

-We must ask ourselves this morning---Is this my heart for the gospel and for the church? Do I desire to be complete in Christ and do I have the same desire for my brothers and sisters in Christ? Do I have this heart for the lost around me? Am I willing to spend and be spent to pour myself into others to make disciples?

-Paul and Barnabas did but there did arise a disagreement in how to go about this mission.

2 - The Disagreement (37-39a)

-"Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 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. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other." (Acts 15:37-39a, ESV)

-Notice that Luke limits the information that he gives us. He gives the basic facts and that there was a disagreement. And the disagreement is sharp. That word for sharp in the Greek carries the meaning of violent emotions. It means to be sharp in the sense of a sickle that cuts. This was an intense difference of opinion. There was no difference over doctrine as we see both men go and the focus is still the true gospel. The difference of opinion is in who goes.

-And before we talk about the disagreement, please guard your hearts from trying to judge who is right and who is wrong. Scripture doesn't tell us who is wrong or right. Luke leaves out a lot of the details and I think the reason why is because trying to judge who is right or wrong is not the point. It's not where Luke wants you to focus your thoughts. He wants us to learn from this so let's look at this with a view to what we can learn in the midst of it.

-In going on this mission, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark who was his cousin. Paul did not want to take John Mark because he didn't think it was wise to take someone who had withdrawn from the previous work of ministry that they were doing together. We see this in Acts 13.

-“Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem,” (Acts 13:13, ESV)

-Now Luke does not tell us why Mark left the work. There could have been a number of things that contributed to Mark leaving the work and going home. This work was not easy---we have seen this to be true and we have seen that there was a lot of opposition. Many opposed the message and opposed them and sought to poison the people's minds concerning them and the message. We don't really know why Mark left but we do know that he did and we see from this passage that Paul didn't like it. Mark had failed in his role in the ministry by leaving it.

-And now after some days Paul wants to go on this mission and Barnabas wants to take John Mark. Why would Barnabas have this desire? We can only speculate based on the character of Barnabas. This was his family so he may have brought Mark under his

wing to disciple and encourage him in the midst of his failure. Maybe he had seen marks of sanctification and growth in Mark and wanted to give him a second chance. It seems that Barnabas may have been focused on the interest of this man that was dear to him. But it seems that Paul's heart is focused on the specific mission. Paul didn't want to risk the mission by taking a doubtful partner who may put the mission at risk. Paul did not think this was wise to do based on Mark's previous actions. And this difference of opinion led to a disagreement that was very sharp and public. This was a disagreement that could threaten the unity of the church. And this is a classic example of whether to place the interests of the individual or of the ministry work as a whole first---and there is no general rule of thumb for dealing with it. You have two men who come to different judgments about the best way to move forward given the facts available to them. One way forward thinks an immediate second chance is worth the risk and the other way forward requires more time for personal growth before being put in the work. And these two men could not come to the same mind concerning this disagreement. Now Luke refrains from taking sides on this issue. Instead, he simply records the event and we draw an obvious conclusion and that is this---the best of men are men at best. Even Christians of the maturity of Paul and Barnabas are capable of sharp disagreements where neither were willing to concede to the opinion of the other. Please listen to me here. This does not justify us as Christians to give ourselves over to quarreling---Scripture is very clear that we should not.

-"Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world," (Philippians 2:14-15, ESV)

-Why don't we grumble or dispute and quarrel and complain? So that we shine as lights for Christ in a lost world that loves to grumble and complain. By living without the grumbling and complaining we actually become a witness for Christ to this lost world.

-If this is true then why would we ever quarrel? James tells us---"**What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.**" (James 4:1-2, ESV)

-Our quarreling is most times rooted in pride and self, which can easily lead to bitterness. So Scripture doesn't allow us to use this text as a justification for us to engage in grumbling and complaining.

-Again, this is not a difference of opinion over doctrine, which would be huge, but this is a difference of opinion on the assessment of an individual considered for the work of the mission. So don't focus on the "who is right and who is wrong" aspect of this but let's see how God uses this for results. Let's see God's goodness in the midst of this strife.

-But one more thing before we move to those results. Imagine being John Mark and being the focus of this disagreement that resulted in this separation. He maybe felt guilty for leaving the work. It would have been easy for him to see himself as useless for the work of God because of his failure. It would have been easy for him to think that because of his failure and because he was the focal point of this massive disagreement, that he would be left to just live out a second rate Christian life with no usefulness to anyone again, especially to God. This must have been so hard for him.

-So how did God use this for his kingdom and glory?

3 – The Results (39b-41)

-“Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” (Acts 15:39b–41, ESV)

-It is very evident that God overruled this disagreement and used it for His glory and the good of His church. The passage says that Barnabas took Mark with him and went to Cyprus. It also says that Paul chose Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia. What Satan thought would surely snuff out the unity of the church and snuff out the gospel

actually led to a **doubling of the effort**. What used to be just one missionary effort now became two.

-This passage also tells us that the **churches were strengthened**. Over in chapter 16 verse 5, which we will get to next week, we are told that the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily. Even in the midst of this disagreement that could have threatened the unity of the church, we see God move in ways that actually strengthen the church for their good and for His glory. Why is this? Well, we obviously know that God is sovereign and in control and is faithful to all of His promises in His Word. But see again the heart of Paul and Barnabas. Even in the midst of the disagreement, the heart of Paul and Barnabas was still the gospel of Christ. They kept the main thing the main thing because that was their heart and they knew that the gospel of Christ is what the church needed most and God added to their number. And when we focus on the main thing, which is the gospel of Christ, self dies and the petty fades away. God uses this for the good of those that belong to Him and are called according to His purpose and He strengthens them and increases their number.

-Luke continues in Acts to tell of Paul and his journey. But this is the last we hear of Barnabas. Tradition says that he stayed in Cyprus and died there as an old man. It seems that **Paul approved of Barnabas's ministry** as we see him write in 1 Corinthians as he is giving a defense of his own ministry.

-“This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? 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? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?” (1 Corinthians 9:3–7, ESV)

-George Washington Carver once said, “I will never let another man ruin my life by making me hate him.” It seems that Paul, instead of harboring bitterness or hatred or

ill will for Barnabas, would choose to remember Barnabas and his heart and work for the gospel ministry.

-And **what about John Mark?** Would he ever become useful again? Would he ever get over this failure in ministry that must have been so hard to deal with personally? Could anyone ever see him in a different light? In this, John Mark did get a second chance and he proved himself faithful. Paul himself writes:

-“Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:11, ESV)

-“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),” (Colossians 4:10, ESV)

-“and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.” (Philemon 24, ESV)

-Peter would write of Mark, **“She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.” (1 Peter 5:13, ESV)**

-Mark was restored and not colored in the eyes of others by his failures or his sin but by his faithfulness even after failure. And by the hand of God, Mark was chosen to pen one the Gospels of Scripture. Oh the hope that Mark must have found in this beloved.

Application: What do we learn from this?

1 – We can always trust in the sovereignty, goodness and faithfulness of God.

-God created the heavens and the earth and there is nothing that is too hard for Him (Jer32:17) and He will always accomplish His purpose (Isaiah 46:8-11). We can trust the promises of His word! We can trust in promises like in Phil. 4 that tells us that we can rejoice always in the Lord and lift up our anxieties to Him with thanksgiving and He promises to give us a peace that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Promises like in Hebrews 4 where we find that we can come to His throne room of grace and find mercy in time of need. We can trust in promises like Phil 1:6 that what God has begun in us, He will bring to completion. Deut 29:29 tells us that God's secret counsel does not belong to us but we are to be about His revealed will found in His word and even though we may not understand what He is doing, we can always trust in Him!

2 – We must have a heart for the gospel.

-We must die to self and live for Christ and we must want the same thing for others. Don't move past the grace of God to you personally. If we do then our heart moves past the gospel and to something else. Remember what Christ has done for you beloved. Remember how He has stepped out of heaven and emptied Himself and took the form of man and was obedient even unto death. Remember that He became sin so that you would become the righteousness of God. His death and resurrection accomplished for you the justification needed to stand before God and be seen as family. He has accomplished for you the adoption into God's family to be seen as God's children by absorbing the wrath that your sins deserved and now you can call God your Father. He has accomplished atonement for your sins and now you who had not received mercy has received mercy and you are forgiven. Think about the fact that you are forgiven. God has removed your sins as far as the east is from the west and he remembers your sin no more. And knowing Christ is eternal life---eternal life in His presence face to face and free from the presence of sin for all of eternity where we will worship Him forever together. And this relationship is personal and intimate and it is even right now that we can enjoy Him. How can He not be the centrality of our lives? How could we ever move past His grace and what He has done? When we stop and think of this personally, how could we not have a heart for the gospel? Don't allow it to be obscured by the things of this world and looking at things in relation to yourself---fight the battle! Look to Christ, the founder and perfecter of your faith and walk in Him.

3 – We need to have a heart for discipleship rooted in a love for Christ that flows to others.

-When we have a heart for the gospel it will inevitably lead to having a heart for others to know Christ and be complete in Him. It just will because that's what a heart of real love longs for. So let's ask ourselves some questions. How am I being disciplined? Who am I allowing to pour into me and am I willing to receive it---do I even desire it? Who am I pouring myself into and do I even desire to do that? Am I taking seriously and applying personally Christ's command to go and make disciples and teach them? Beloved, cultivate a heart of love for others and seek to make disciples that is rooted in Christ's love to you when you didn't deserve it.

4 – Never think that you are useless to God and His mission for the church in Christ. There is usefulness even after failure.

-Think about what it would have been like if Mark would have just crawled in a hole and wallowed in his failure and self-pity. He would have not been useful to anyone and especially to the work of God in Christ. Never would he have been an ambassador for Christ and never would we have the Gospel of Mark. Don't crawl in a hole beloved. We all are going to fail---we just will. We all probably already have. But realize that we are all desperately dependent on the Lord. He has provided even the work that we are to walk in.

-“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)

-Paul wrote to Timothy:

-“Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore,

if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” (2 Timothy 2:20–21, ESV)

-May we get up from our failures and may we pursue holiness in Christ and live in obedience---hating and fighting sin knowing that we have been set apart unto God as holy by the sacrifice of Christ. When we do this and live walking in the Spirit, we will be ready for every good work and we will be used of God for His kingdom and for His glory. Trust in Him, walk in Him and be used of Him!

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