

Scripture Reading:

Acts 15: “ 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. 36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

'Tension in God's Church'

I mentioned last week that Chapter 15 could easily be tagged as the chapter of conflicts. We studied the conflict over the relationship of grace and law which led to the first church council last week and today we consider the personal struggle between Paul and Barnabas.

- Ironically a much shorter text brings us face to face with a more difficult conflict to resolve.

This conflict between Paul and Barnabas is personal; and when compared to the great doctrine hammered out at the church council one could even rightly say petty. But when we think about our own lives and those we have watched around us isn't it always the personal and petty things that often trip us up?

- This is one of those passages where we can be tempted to say, ouch that did not turn out well and want to quickly move on.

This would be very unwise for two important reasons:

- First we would miss the lessons that God can teach us about the importance of taking care of the little things
- And more importantly we learn again that God is building His Kingdom with earthen vessels, those jars of clay that can only be effective in our service because of the work that Jesus has done to prepare us for His service!

So let's see what happened and learn our lessons well: First we need to remember that both men are pillars of the early Church: Barnabas, the son of encouragement, has served since the early days in Jerusalem when he sold property to help those in need, introduced Paul to the other disciples arguing that his conversion was the real thing and was sent by the Church to Antioch when the Spirit did a great work in that city where they first called us Christians.

Paul was saved on the road to Damascus and called by Jesus Himself to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. He immediately began to preach the Good News and also spent three years under the instruction of Jesus himself preparing for the great journeys that lay ahead.

After meeting with the converted Paul in Jerusalem and coming to Antioch, Barnabas seeks out Paul in his home town of Tarsus and brings him back to help with the growing work.

The Church at Antioch sends them both on an important mission journey and they return reporting great success after facing many trials and persecutions together.

They then are sent to the Church Council in Jerusalem to confront error in the church and return with Judas and Silas with a very encouraging letter and report.

- And now they have a shared vision of returning to the churches they established to encourage them.

We see no hint of trouble or struggle between these two men except the brief mention by Paul in the Book of Galatians about how Barnabas was impacted briefly by Peter's failure to properly embrace the Gentile believers: But even here Paul puts the blame squarely with Peter.

- Now in working out the details of their shared vision to return to those new churches a conflict arises and Luke tells us... "there arose a sharp disagreement."

How could this happen? How could these two men, who just participated in a great church council that solved a much more difficult matter, NOT be able find a way to deal with this conflict without a sharp disagreement that led to their permanent separation?

- As we try to actually get our mind around what happened here...
Well, that is about the time we are tempted to just move on in Luke's orderly account!
- However, it is better to stay and learn our lessons!

Yes, it is ironic that this conflict grew out of their desire to strengthen the new churches!

I believe that Paul and Barnabas face a typical satanic attack aimed at discouraging them from the work that needed to be done. And it is important for us to see that even while some real damage was done to their relationship, the work of the Kingdom goes on; and in fact is increased with not one but two mission teams going out from Antioch.

Now the wrong lesson to learn would be to take up the attitude of thinking it does not much matter how we act... God will use us anyway. This is the very problem Paul addressed in Romans when the Gospel of grace was attacked by some saying, 'well then why not sin more so we can have more grace' and Paul simply says, "God forbid!" This incident may well have been on his mind as he wrote those words.

So what was the problem that just could not be solved it seems...

- Well, here is our problem: Luke does not tell us!

-- Now wait, you say, it was about whether they should take John Mark on the journey!

-- Yes, that was the issue but what was the problem? Why was John unfit?

- Well yes, because he left them in the middle of the last journey!

-- Fine, but why did he leave?

-- Luke gives us no details: We don't know why he left and we don't even know how or when he returned to Antioch [though it is possible that Barnabas was suggesting that they bring him back for the next trip].

- How are we supposed to know WHO was right in this heated debate between Paul and Barnabas?

This lack of information means that most of the discussions that we have about this argument are just speculations? Perhaps the Spirit writing through Luke wants us to focus on what we do know: These two men had a conflict that resulted in a heated debate and their separation.

- If these two great Saints, these two pillars of the early Church can fall into such sin, then what chance do we have to avoid doing the same?
- Well, I am here to tell ALL of us this morning that we are NOT going to escape such things in this life and that, YES, it will be the silly little things that often trip us up.

And of course the Spirit wants us to know that even where we fail He will be there to pick up the pieces and continue the advance of God's Kingdom until it fills all the earth.

In our flesh we fail at both ends of this: We strive to be spiritual and wise and mature so we will not fall into such sin.

- **Then when we do sin, we assume that we are no longer valuable in the work of the Kingdom!**

Now again, it is very important that we see the big picture here:

- **Paul and Barnabas worked together to grow and establish the first major Gentile church there in Antioch.**
- **They journeyed together on the first mission journey facing fierce opposition from the Jews, the idolatry of the Gentiles and the good old dangers of traveling by land or sea in those days.**
- **They confronted the first major dispute in the Church over law & grace and won the day at the first church council.**
- **They even now share the same vision for a return trip to the churches they established on the mission journey.**

When you step back and see all of this, I think it is safe to say that no matter WHAT the problem that Mark had really was...

- **Paul & Barnabas should have been able to resolve it for the sake of their ministry.**

They could have flipped a coin, gotten Mark a little more training, taken a physician along if he had health problems or brought in a mediator!

It is VERY easy for us to see that the importance of their work together and this upcoming trip far outweighed whatever the issue was...

- **And yet, “there arose a sharp disagreement” and Paul and Barnabas parted company.**

We must be careful that we do not assume that because this is the last that we hear about Barnabas that he was in the wrong and Paul was in the right. Luke is not giving us an exhaustive history of the early church, but an orderly account which is going to now follow the work of Paul.

This does not mean that the Spirit was working only through Paul: He was filling the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus through not only Paul, but the continuing work of Barnabas and Mark, through the other disciples, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius and his friends, and the many Saints scattered after the death of Stephan. The Spirit worked through all these early Saints knowing they were jars of clay and that as such they would have problems: Like Paul & Barnabas

So Luke’s silence about the further work of Barnabas does not point to his guilt and in fact when we consider some of the later things said about John Mark, it may have been Paul who was being unreasonable, but the bottom-line is the Luke simply does not give us those details either.

I would argue that we lack details about John Mark’s actions which caused the tension and any assignment of guilt because the Spirit wants us to learn the lesson in general rather than in the specifics:

In other words, if such a thing can happen with Paul and Barnabas then it could happen to any of us:

- **In our church relationships**
- **In our family relationships**
- **In our marriages**
- **In our vocations & neighborhoods!**

And more than likely it will not revolve around the major issues we are often more careful about: It will be over something that would appear minor to any objective outside observer.

Let's consider a few examples: You have a Christian partner in a business venture: You have known each other for many years, you have built this business from scratch and faced many challenges from the market place and the government. You understand each other's motives, you know each other's families and you trust each other completely. One day a clerk who had worked for your company some years ago returns and your partner wants to hire him back. You remember him leaving over something trivial at a time where things were really busy so you have no interest in taking the clerk back.

Rather than talking it through in a calm manner, talking with your wives, or seeking other outside counsel... It turns into a major fight where after many heated discussions you throw up your hands and say to your partner 'fine, you hire him and take over such and such part of our business and I will go and start a new venture we had discussed with some other folks!

- Sadly the two of you never work together again and even your families drift apart.

Now how could such a sad thing happen when they had had so many successes together in the midst of much greater challenges?

- The answer is simple: SIN!

Would this mean God was finished with them and would no longer be able to use them in His work? Usually, not because He may just go on to grow two major Christian companies. However, these men would never be able to look back at this time and say, "Why just look at that; all of our sinful attitudes were good for the Kingdom after all."

- God can certainly use broken vessels, but not if they become proud of being broken vessels!

I hope you can see that this should give us some HUGE warning signs about how we handle things in many of our relationships:

Epecially those that cannot be broken like our marriage vows or the relationship with our parents.

- We need to keep those signs up because it is not going to be the BIG issues that cause such problems
- As we see so clearly with Paul and Barnabas, such problems can come even in mature relationships if we are not careful.

A strong Christian couple over the years may face financial hardships, trouble with their children, or perhaps even the death of a child and work it all out together growing closer and more mature in their marriage. And then suddenly a relatively minor issue like whether a certain family should come to dinner or who needs to clean the car more often or whether you should return to a certain vacation spot becomes a major point of dispute resulting in angry debates.

- Here we don't have the option to just take new spouses and move on with new marriages!
- Such a doubling would not be a blessing for the Kingdom but rightly seen as an abomination.

Our marriages vows stated, "for better or for worse" so things will have to be worked out and yes, the Spirit is there to assist, IF we are willing to listen.

What we don't want to do is miss the important lesson from this account of Paul & Barnabas, by thinking it is the end of the world and certainly our marriage if we find ourselves having such conflicts over such silly things.

- Rather, we need to learn to keep short accounts and NOT allow a root of bitterness to take hold in our relationship.

The same can certainly be true between parents and children. As parents we might be doing great work in many major areas, like their discipleship and instruction or discipline and obedience and then stress out because they don't like a particular vegetable or failed some test.

Children, you need to be especially aware of being unthankful: There are so many ways that your parents bless you and love you and it can all go out the window if you become absorbed in or focused on just one little place where they have said "no" and most likely wisely so!

On the other side, I can assure you that your parents are sinners and that they will make mistakes:

- This does NOT give you the right to some new ones or even rebellion!

In closing I want to turn our lesson around and see that we can also receive great encouragement from this brief text: We are saddened to see the conflict between Paul and Barnabas and how badly it turned out. And we can know that Mark is certainly one of those earthen vessels. While we don't know the details of his failure on the 1st mission journey we know there was one and that it was serious enough to cause all this trouble between Paul and Barnabas. Again, it is easy for us to relate and think of all the ways we have failed and caused problems...

- As we reflect on such failings it becomes easy to say there is NO way the Spirit needs, or even wants, a vessel like me carrying out His mission!

John Mark did not allow his sin to defeat him: He was willing to confess his error and come for a 2nd journey. Even when he saw how his former failures continued to cause problems, he was still willing to go with Barnabas and to serve faithfully in the Church.

-- In the not too distant future Paul in his letter to Philemon would refer to Mark as his "fellow laborer."

-- Paul tells the Saints at Colossi to welcome Mark if he comes to them

-- And in Paul's final reflections on his ministry in his final letter to young Timothy we read this:

II Timothy 4:6 "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. 9 Be diligent to come to me quickly; 10 for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica--Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry."

And lest we forget the blessing that Mark continues to be for all of us, he was the author of the second of the synoptic Gospels!

So we see in all three men the importance of confession and faith: We are those earthen vessels that are prone to failure & breakage. As Paul told the Corinthians, our lives will be filled with gold, silver, precious stones, and wood, hay, stubble. Our prayer should be that God would refine the gold and silver and polish the jewels while trusting that it is best for us and the Kingdom that He cast away the wood, hay and stubble into the fire.

- We should be reminded again of the importance of our gathering for Covenant Renewal worship:

We must respond to God's call, coming to God honestly each week confessing our sins, individually and as a Body. As we experience His mercy by seeing Him receive our worship, our prayers and our gifts, we also receive His new instructions from the Word and encouragement to live by faith as we feast at His Table... Sent forth with the faith to believe that the Spirit of God can use even US as His instruments for filling the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus!

Communion Meditation: Psalm 133: