

Acts 15:36-41 - Paul & Barnabas Separate

Back in Acts 13, John Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey. As that mission turned toward Gentile lands, however, Mark deserted the company. Now, two years or so later, Barnabas wants to bring Mark along with them in their second missionary journey (v 37). Barnabas again shows the power of Christian love and forgiveness. If you remember, Barnabas was the first disciple to accept Paul as a brother in Christ. Paul, however, does not want John Mark to join their company (v 38). Where Barnabas exudes sympathy and forgiveness, Paul prioritizes the demanding needs of the mission and his vision for the gospel. The divergence leads to a sharp disagreement leading to the separation of these two friends and brothers in the faith.

Is Barnabas or Paul in the right? Luke does not tell us. He makes no judgments. Instead, we can learn valuable principles from this text. First, Christians ought to imitate the kindheartedness and forgiving spirit of Barnabas. Forgiveness flows from a heart which knows it has been forgiven by God. Second, however, we must learn from Paul's conviction and determination. While we must be apt to forgive, we must not let emotional attachments direct our gospel vision. Paul knew the challenges of the road before him & his team, and he did seem to view Mark as ready for the task. The real tragedy of this text is not the separation itself but the manner of the separation. There will come a time when gospel laborers need to separate—because of doctrinal difference or even personality issues. We must not be surprised when disagreements come. We must, however, learn from this episode between Paul and Barnabas. Separation in the mission might be the right course of action but it must be done in godliness and in holiness.

Acts 16 - The Gospel in Philippi

Though circumcision was not one of the four regulations set in writing by the Jerusalem council, Paul will be taking Timothy with him in delivering the news of those regulations. Paul therefore asks that Timothy be circumcised, not as a requirement for salvation or even an act of obedience to God, but to remove a significant barrier as both men minister to churches of Jewish and Gentile congregations. This was grace and love in practice to others on behalf of Paul and especially Timothy. Context and motivation are critical to Paul. He argues strongly against being circumcised if those arguing for circumcision believe that it is necessary in order to please God (Gal. 5:1–6); yet if the motivation is to remove barriers to people hearing about the grace of God, Paul will gladly give up any number of cultural practices or preferences (1 Cor. 9:12–23).

In Acts 16:14, Luke again emphasizes that God is the active agent in bringing believers to faith in Christ, this time with the example of Lydia. The Lord is the one who graciously opens hearts to repent and believe the gospel. Because God is powerful and does this, it encourages us to pray for those who do not yet believe.

Acts 16:25–34 is one of the most moving episodes in Acts. Paul and Silas have been savagely beaten and imprisoned for rescuing a girl from a dishonorable and probably oppressive occupation. We then see the terror-ridden job of the Philippian jailer, one in which he faced death for any failure (see 12:19). He knows he has failed, he knows his fate, and he decides to take his own life. He has given up. But, through Paul, God rescues this man. “What must I do to be saved?” the man asks (16:30). The response is stunning. Paul and Silas do not tell the jailer to

clean up his life. They do not exhort him to forsake any particular sin. They do not tell him to do anything. Rather: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (v. 31). Trusting faith in Christ, apart from anything we bring to the table, is all that is required to be saved from what we rightly deserve: condemnation and hell. This is the promise of grace to us, as individuals, and it extends to our households as well.

Acts 17 - The Gospel Goes to Thessalonica, Berea & Athens

At the beginning of Acts 17 we find Paul & Silas Witnessing in Thessalonica. From Philippi Paul traveled the 94 miles (151 km) to Thessalonica, capital of Macedonia. In 1 Thess. 2:2, Paul recounts that he and his team “had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.” He also mentions in Phil. 4:16 that the Philippian church helped him with his material needs during this time. After facing much opposition they traveled to Berea and found some “noble men.” What marked them? Luke saw the Bereans as “more noble” in their receiving Paul’s message with all eagerness, and then in looking to the written words of the OT as their final authority, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. By commending this activity, Luke encourages this searching of the Scriptures as a pattern for all believers and also gives support to the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, the idea that the Bible can be understood rightly, not only by scholars but also by ordinary people who read it eagerly & diligently, with conscious dependence on God for help.

In Acts 17:22–34 we see the gospel has not changed, though Paul’s presentation of it begins in a much different manner than usual. Proclaiming the gospel takes a variety of forms in the book of Acts. Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2). But here in Athens, Paul freely uses aspects of Greek culture as bridges to the gospel, while calling people influenced by that same culture to repent. God is gracious to reach each culture where we are, even in the midst of our idolatry; he is too gracious, though, to allow us to remain there.

Paul’s approach to the Greek elites of Athens is a contrast in preaching style to how he approaches the Jews in the synagogues, but it is the same gospel of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Paul’s outreach to the Gentiles, though it tends to stir up the Jews to jealousy, is simply a reflection of Jesus’ gracious approach to outsiders. Jesus’ ministry was inclusive from its beginning. He ministered to the rich, the poor, the despised, the religious, the secular, men, and women (e.g., Matt. 8:1–13; 15:22–28; John 4:2–42). Jesus’ ministry reached beyond Jerusalem to include Nazareth, Galilee, and Samaria.

Paul and the other apostles simply carried forward the inclusive approach set forth by Jesus. Paul insisted, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), and he taught that the expansion of God’s kingdom to other nations was at the very heart of God’s plan to redeem the cosmos. The inclusiveness of the kingdom of God is artistically expressed in the book of Revelation, where we read that people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9; 14:6) receive the gospel and are gathered in celebration of the Lamb.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Had you been Paul or Barnabas, how do you think you would have handled the disagreement? When disagreements occur, are you ever tempted to be most concerned with maintaining your reputation with friends, or a veneer of peace, or your pride?
2. What are some modern-day examples that reflect the principle we see in Paul circumcising Timothy in Acts 16 - that is, of removing impediments for the sake of the gospel?
3. What do you think it looks like to have a life and ministry that is led by the Holy Spirit today?
4. What do you think are some of the main idols being worshiped in your culture? How can our response to the idol-worship reflect Paul's response in Athens? How did he respond? What would that look like for us today?
5. Who are the "poets" and "prophets" in our culture today? In what ways are you listening to the "poets" and "prophets" of your culture, so that you are best able to explain the gospel in a way that is clear and compelling to those around you?