

Acts 15:36-41

May 24, 2020

Ephesians 4:25-27, 30-32

New Directions

Resurrection Power 7

Since Easter we've been talking about "resurrection power" and the new life offered us in Christ through that power. Those growing into this new life are being reshaped by the Holy Spirit and become together members of God's own family. Yet, despite the work of the Holy Spirit there is not always holy unity. Sometimes disagreements can make it difficult to pull together in the same direction. At such times it's best to disagree without being disagreeable.

In Paul and Barnabas, we have an example of what Christian community really means, even in times of disagreement. Their story shows how believers who support and encourage one another, and work together for Christ's mission, can still have disagreements and contentions. Yet God continues can redirect their efforts for His purposes.

The story of Paul and Barnabas is found in the "Acts of the Apostles." This is the first church history ever written. The author was Dr. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. Luke and Acts could be read as one continuous narrative. In his introduction to Acts Luke writes: *In my former book, [Theophilus,] I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.* Acts 1:1-2. Then he goes on to narrate what the apostles (those who had been with the resurrected Jesus) did and were doing as Christ's ambassadors.

Dynamic Duo

Paul and Barnabas were the dynamic duo of Christian evangelism, taking the gospel to the Gentiles, that is non-Jews. Paul and Barnabas knew that Jesus was the Messiah for all peoples, not just the Jews.

What do we know about these two? Firstly, we know that Paul (aka Saul) was a Jew, a strict Pharisee, one who was meticulous about keeping the law - all the religious rules and regulations. He initially persecuted the followers of Christ but was dramatically converted and became a champion of Christ. The Bible says this about Barnabas: *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement")*, Acts 4:36. "Son of encouragement..." Who have been encouragers in your faith journey?

So, Paul went from persecutor of Christ to champion, but the other disciples were still suspicious. The book of Acts tells us that ... *Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had*

preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus, Acts 9:27. (Everyone needs an advocate at some time in life).

The report continues ... *for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch, Acts 11:25-26. Then Saul (Paul) and Barnabas were entrusted to take a monetary offering to the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:27-30). When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark, Acts 12:25.* Remember that name, John Mark.

The church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas to go out as missionaries – “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:1-4). And so they traveled together over a large part of Asia Minor preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. They were brothers in the Lord and brothers in challenges and hardships. You find out a lot about a person when you travel on a long journey with them.

Sad Parting

Yet despite their great friendship in the Lord and their efforts as co-workers in the Lord’s service, Paul and Barnabas had a falling out. As reported in the book of Acts Paul said to Barnabas, let’s go revisit those fellowships we planted on the last missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them, but Paul, remembering that John Mark had deserted them on the last mission said “no way.” And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, Acts 15:39.

When the author of Acts (Luke) says they had “a sharp disagreement” he means they really had a big one – maybe there was shouting and name-calling. Their disagreement over John-Mark was big enough to split up two godly men

Paul and Barnabas had invested themselves in John Mark ... No doubt both had been disappointed with his desertion.... They shared the goal of revisiting and encouraging the new believers in Asia Minor, but perhaps Barnabas had more patience and compassion for John Mark – he was an encourager after all! Theirs wasn’t really an argument over biblical doctrine. It was two different personalities clashing. Sometimes when you put passionate and compassionate people together there will be friction.

And sometimes our greatest hurts do not come from acquaintances or strangers. It’s the people we’re closest to, opened our hearts to, made ourselves vulnerable to, who cause us the greatest pain. If you’ve ever felt that way about someone you trusted, someone you’ve been through a lot with, you’ll get a sense of Barnabas and Paul’s dispute. And when you feel that it involves a sacred responsibility, like spreading the gospel, whoa boy the passion flares up!

[Cosimo de Medici (ruler of Florence, Italy 1389-1464) once said, “We read that we ought to forgive our enemies, but we do not read that we ought to forgive our friends.”] Sometimes it is easier to forgive our enemies than it is to

forgive our friends. We expect our enemies to dislike, or even hate, us. While we expect our friends to really care about us. When they disappoint us, or betray us, we're more deeply hurt and hence we find it hard to forgive them. Do you think Judas' kiss and Peter's denials hurt Jesus worse than the Pharisee's hateful words? Don't we have very high expectations for our brothers and sisters in Christ? Maybe higher than what we expect of ourselves.

Forgive and Forget

Every week we say together the Lord's Prayer. Do you ever think about this line – *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*? The point is if we expect God to forgive us, we must forgive others. Is there someone you need to forgive? Experience will tell you that **forgiving is almost always an act of faith**. It's almost never an act of feeling, [and that's because our stubborn sinful nature shouts: "No way I'm going to take the first step...no way I'm going to humble myself."]

What about forgetting? We might forgive someone, but does that mean we never remember what they did? The Lord says, ... *for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more, Jeremiah 31:34*. But if God knows everything, and then forgets something, He no longer knows everything. How can that be? **What the Bible means here is to choose not to bring to mind**. (The Hebrew word translated "remember" is *zakar*, can to, "think about, meditate upon, pay attention to, remember, recollect, mention, declare, recite, proclaim, invoke, commemorate..." among others, TWOT, V. 1, p. 550).

In other words, **we choose not to rehash the forgiven sin**, but we are aware of it. We don't use the forgiven sin as something to hold over another; the debt of sin is cancelled.

Here's another example from history: John Wesley and George Whitfield. Like Paul and Barnabas, John Wesley and George Whitfield had a history of shared ministry. When John and Charles Wesley were students at Oxford University, they took in young George and encouraged his education, despite his low estate in life. George became an enthusiastic convert to the revival begun by John and Charles. It was he who persuaded John to take his preaching to the fields and factories and reach the unconverted. George developed into an outstanding preacher for the movement. Whitfield was an exuberant, dynamic preacher who drew people in. Wesley was the methodical organizer who made disciples out of converts.

In time though, Whitfield and Wesley had a falling out – over some doctrinal differences (whether God sovereignly chooses those saved and whether sinless perfection was attainable in this life). For a time, their differences tore them apart. Whitfield led a rival association of Methodist societies in England (The Calvinistic Methodist Societies). Their split and debate in print became widely

known in England. At one point, Wesley was asked if he expected to see Whitfield in heaven. He purportedly replied something to the effect: “No sir I do not. For the light shining from the throne of God will be so bright that I will not see Mr. Whitfield sitting nearby.”

Within a short time they reconciled, agreeing that their doctrinal dispute was of minor importance in God’s great scheme of things. Their efforts were complementary. [They pledged to support one another in their preaching and organizing. The gospel was preached to many more through their combined efforts.] Charles Wesley (John’s brother) penned these lines: “Come on, my Whitefield! (since the strife is past) / And friends at first are friends again at last.”

What a great witness to Christian forbearance and forgiveness – putting on the clothing of the resurrected life. [God gave them new directions for their work: George focused on preaching throughout England, Scotland and Wales, while John worked to organize the Methodist groups they’d established, while also traveling and preaching.]

Faith says, “Regardless of how I feel about it, I will seek restoration and reconciliation. I will be tenderhearted and forgiving, just as God for Christ’s sake forgave me,” (Eph. 4:32). God rewards faith...even if it’s not reciprocated...the soul that forgives is set free. How are you doing with relationships in your Christian fellowship?

New Directions

We don’t know every detail of what happened between Barnabas and Paul. They went in new directions. They continued the work they’d been set apart to do – Paul went on mission with Silas, while Barnabas took John Mark. Maybe Paul focused on his goal of reinforcing the newly established congregations. Why take John Mark, who had caused them more work the last time? Barnabas, though, saw a chance to speak into this young man’s life, and grow him in the faith. In the midst of their goals, and their parting ways, God was able to use them both to further spread the gospel.

It’s good to have goals in life, in work, in church, in spiritual life. Without goals we might not get anywhere. Nevertheless, God has His purposes and **if we’re in tune with God our goals become secondary to His design.** Listen for His promptings. Sometimes what we think is a vital goal in the service of the Lord may not be, as God has His purposes. I know this sounds kind of wishy-washy, but what I mean is, sure have some goals ... but always **leave room for the Holy Spirit to direct even as you pursue your goals.**

Let’s not forget that God is alive and active. Be on the lookout for God’s work and open the door to His Holy Spirit. I think that’s what Paul and Barnabas did ... I think we can too. It was on this second journey that Paul met young Timothy whom he mentored and who later became a pastor and church leader.

BTW in one of his last letters, writing from prison and likely knowing he will soon be executed, Paul mentions John Mark again. He wrote to Timothy his protégé saying, *Come to me quickly. Demas, because he loved this world has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me...GET MARK and bring him with you, because he is useful to me in my ministry, 2 Tim. 4:9-11.* Notice who is with him at the end – Luke the author. Did you catch the name of the one Paul mentions last? He says, “Get John Mark...bring him with you. He’s useful in my ministry.” At the end of his life Paul wants John Mark there with him. The sharp disagreement of the past didn’t matter anymore. What mattered was his ministry... eternity... and the people he loved. What really matters to you? Here’s St. Paul again ...

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus, Phil. 3:13-14.