

# A Sharp Disagreement

ACTS 15:36-41

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Most of us here this morning understand that when good people get together, they will nearly always disagree in matters of personal opinion: Coke vs. Pepsi, McDonald's vs. Burger King, Ford vs. Chevy, and so on. The possibilities are truly endless. It is impossible for two people to be in a close relationship and to never disagree on anything. We even think of identical twins, sharing the identical genetic makeup: Do identical twins ever disagree on anything? Obviously, they do! Disagreeing is a natural part of this life. We think of marriage, the most intimate of all human relationships. The way I look at it is: If a married couple agree with each other on absolutely everything, then one of them is not necessary. God made all of us very different, we look around us, and we know from personal experience that disagreements are quite common.

With this challenge in mind, I would like for us to consider a passage this morning where two of the most godly men in the Bible had such a strong disagreement with each other that they actually had to separate for a time. The Bible, in fact, describes it as being a **"sharp disagreement."** The passage is found in Acts 15:36-41 (p. 1730). I am referring, of course, to Paul and Barnabas. There is a tremendous value to studying this passage, because we know that even when strong Christians disagree in matters of personal opinion, the consequences can truly be significant for eternity if those disagreements are not handled in an appropriate way. We think of what King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 18:19, **"A brother offended [truly] is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle."** We know what Solomon was talking about there. Some of us have a stubborn streak, and if somebody says something or does something to let us down or to make us mad, we know what sometimes happens. We have a tendency to become even more entrenched in our position, as Solomon says, **"...like the bars of a castle."** That is an inspired statement, and most of us know from experience that Solomon was telling the truth, **"A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city."** And many of these offenses can be traced back to the fact that we are different. There are times when we will disagree with one another. And sometimes those disagreements can be a distraction.

As we think about the various characters in the New Testament, I would suggest that it would be difficult to find two people any closer in their relationship than Paul and Barnabas. In so many ways, those two names just go together – Paul and Barnabas. But again, there was a time when even these two men had a **"sharp disagreement."** By way of background, we know that Barnabas is first mentioned in Acts 4:36 as he sells a piece of land and brings the money to the apostles. His name is actually Joseph. Barnabas is more of a nickname, and the name Barnabas literally means "Son of Encouragement." In other words, Barnabas was an

encourager. That is what he was known for. And we see this the next time we see Barnabas in Acts 9. After being a leading persecutor of the church, Saul is baptized and tries to join up and work together with the church in Jerusalem. Well, the people thought it might be a trick, so Barnabas steps in, puts his own reputation on the line, and encourages the church to accept Saul (or Paul) as one of their own. The plan works, and some time later, Paul and Barnabas go out together on what is now known as Paul's First Missionary Journey. They are sent out by the church at the beginning of Acts 13 and spend the next three years establishing churches in what is now the nation of Turkey. They appoint elders in those churches on their way back home. In the first part of Acts 15, the church needs some clarification on whether Gentiles need to basically become Jews before obeying the gospel (which they don't), but after working that out, Paul and Barnabas start making plans to go out on their Second Missionary Journey. And this is where we pick up with Acts 15:36-41,

***<sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches***

As we study this passage, I would like for us to study, first of all, the disagreement these two men had, and then I'd like for us to close by noticing a number of very positive results that came about as a result of their disagreement, seemingly arranged in some way by the providence of God.

**I. First of all, though, we need to make sure we understand the actual DISAGREEMENT here.**

And to understand the disagreement, we need to understand the men involved. On one hand, we have Barnabas. According to Acts 11:24, Barnabas was ***"a good man...full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."*** Barnabas, then, is a solid Christian leader. As we noted before, Barnabas is also a great encouragement, having introduced Paul to the church in Jerusalem. Barnabas is always looking for the good in people, always assuming the best, a very patient man. On the other hand, we have Paul the apostle, formerly a persecutor of the church, most likely a genius, highly educated, intense, passionate about Jesus and his church, on fire for the Lord. As Paul and Barnabas work together on the First Missionary Journey, then, you can see why they make such a great team, traveling together on foot and by boat, establishing congregations, supporting each other in the face of intense persecution – the passion and fire of Paul alongside the love and encouragement of Barnabas.

With this as background, it is interesting to me to notice that these two men who just helped bring unity to the church in the first part of Acts 15 are now struggling with each other. In the first part of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas are sent to Antioch to help solve a problem, and they did help solve the problem. But now they have a problem with each other, a ***"sharp disagreement"*** (according to verse 39). One commentary points out that we have a reference here to ***"an out of control venting of anger."*** And the issue is whether they should take along John Mark on the Second Missionary Journey. The plan (according to verse 36) is that they should go back and revisit those congregations they had established earlier, that they should go back and strengthen those new congregations.

Going back to Acts 13, on the first journey, Mark was along for the ride until they got ready to leave the island of Cypress. The situation on the island was rather bizarre. That is where Paul blinded the sorcerer, a man who is described by Paul as being ***“full of all deceit and fraud, a son of the devil, the enemy of all righteousness.”*** Some assume that John Mark got scared. Some assume he got homesick. Some assume he got tired of his role on that first journey. If you look back to Acts 13:5, you will notice that John is described as being the ***“helper”*** on that journey. The word was used in ships in the ancient world, and it literally refers to the “under rower.” As you can imagine, the “under rower” was the guy who never saw the light of day but spent his whole life in the bottom of the ship, rowing. Those of you who have served in the Navy may be able to empathize with John Mark. Not that he was literally rowing, but he was the ***“helper,”*** he was the guy on that trip who was always doing stuff, always running errands. So again, maybe it was fear, maybe homesickness, or maybe the position he was in, but for whatever reason, the Bible tells us in Acts 13:13 that ***“...John left them and returned to Jerusalem.”*** And John Mark does seem to be rather young. Many scholars assume that Mark is the young man referred to in Mark 14:51. Do you remember when Jesus was arrested, a young man ran away naked? He was wearing nothing but a sheet, the soldiers grabbed the sheet, and the kid kept on running! Many people think that was Mark! Other than this, we know that the church in Jerusalem met in his mom’s house, we know that Barnabas was Mark’s cousin, but that is about it.

So now, not too long after he skips out on the first trip, Barnabas now wants to take John Mark on the next journey, and Paul wants nothing of it. So here we have a standoff, a standoff between two rock-solid, spiritually mature Christian men, men who had given their lives for the preaching of the gospel, men who had served shoulder-to-shoulder through some of the most difficult spiritual battles, both men being fully committed to the cause of Christ in every possible way. On one hand, Barnabas could have very easily reminded Paul that he had given PAUL a second chance. On the other hand, Paul was concerned with the mission. Paul knew that on the last journey he was personally stoned and left for dead, that it probably wouldn’t be any better this time, and Paul didn’t want to deal with the distraction some kid getting homesick and going home to mom again this time. Perhaps Paul was thinking about what Jesus said in Luke 9:52, ***“If any man puts his hand to the plow and turns back, he is not worthy of the kingdom of God.”*** Maybe Paul is thinking about the words of King Solomon in Proverbs 25:19, ***“Like a bad tooth and an unsteady foot is confidence in a faithless man in time of trouble.”*** Paul, then, is thinking, “I can’t deal with this! Here I am getting beat up and left for dead, and I can’t be worried about some kid.” Paul and Barnabas, then, had a sharp disagreement. Paul wasn’t up for any more drama, but Barnabas wanted to give his young cousin one more chance.

So what is the correct answer to this problem? What should have happened here? Well, I don’t know. But I would make an interesting observation: Do you remember how the First Missionary Journey got started back at the beginning of Acts 13? In Acts 13:2, the Bible says that while the leaders of the church were serving God and fasting, the Holy Spirit stepped in and said, ***“Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”*** Very interesting! In verse 3, they fasted and prayed AGAIN, laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, and sent them on their way. How does the Second Journey start? It starts in Acts 15:36, ***“After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brethren....’”*** I don’t know whether to make a big deal out of this, but do you notice a difference there? Prayer, fasting, and the Holy Spirit vs. ***“Paul said....”*** Where was God in this? I don’t know. We’re not told. On that first journey, the Holy Spirit said who would be going, but on this Second Journey, nothing. No word from God concerning who would be traveling, and that is where we have the problem! So who is right and who is wrong? Should John Mark have gone, or should he have stayed at home? I don’t know. And that is part of the problem. If we start trusting in our own wisdom and experience, we start to have trouble. Paul and Barnabas, then, have a ***“sharp disagreement.”*** This is not over a point of doctrine (like the problem solved earlier in this chapter), but this is a disagreement over something in

the realm of opinion (pews vs. chairs). And we find here they do not come to any kind of a resolution. They split. Paul goes off in one direction, and Barnabas goes off in the other direction.

- II. **As we try to make sense of what happens here, we need to ask, “Why in the world would Luke include the details of this argument in the book of Acts?” Isn’t this a little bit strange, to read about an unresolved personal dispute between two of the most godly men in the New Testament? Why, then, would God want us to be reading about this nearly 2000 years later? As we try to make sense of this passage, I would suggest that looking back on it with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, THERE WERE SOME BENEFITS TO THE SEPARATION THAT TOOK PLACE HERE. So perhaps we have a reminder here that EVEN SHARP DISAGREEMENTS CAN SOMETIMES BE WORKED THROUGH FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.**
- A. **So, in terms of good things happening, I would point out, first of all, that because of this very sharp disagreement, the gospel was spread in ways that it would not have been without this disagreement.**

We see this, starting in verse 39, as Barnabas takes Mark and heads out to Cypress, and then in verse 40, as Paul takes Silas and leaves for Syria and Cilicia. If we were to read a few verses ahead into Chapter 16, we would find that on Paul’s journey into Asia Minor, he and Silas pick up a Christian young man by the name of Timothy. So if we can picture this, we start out with two men planning on one mission, and we end with five men going on two missions. We don’t have much information on the mission of Barnabas and Mark, because Luke (the author of this account) hooks up with Paul in Acts 16:11. Before verse 11, the author talks about **“they,”** but starting in verse 10, the author starts writing about how **“we”** did this and that, and how **“we”** left on a ship for Macedonia. Do you remember how we studied the Philippian Jailer two weeks ago? That jailer was baptized (in part) because Paul decided to go off on his own, because the plan changed from Paul’s original strategy. Remember: The original mission was to go and strengthen the churches that had already been established. The mission shifted, though, and Paul was called by God to head over to Macedonia. And because of this, the gospel was preached in Europe for the very first time – Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and so on.

I would emphasize here: The reason some good came from this disagreement is because Paul and Barnabas did not get discouraged. They did not give up, they did not get disillusioned, but they kept on pressing forward. Paul did not say, “This Barnabas guy I such a pain – I’m out of here! I am giving up on the Christian faith!” Barnabas did not say, “Paul is so stubborn, I think I’m just going to quit church!” These men did not get disillusioned, but they kept on doing the Lord’s work and stuck with it. They understood that the cause was greater than their disagreement. Even though both might have had a right to feel frustrated or even let down a little bit, they stuck with it. They dug in, and they moved forward, doing what was right.

And I would also emphasize again: This was not a doctrinal dispute. The doctrinal dispute was solved earlier in this chapter. This is a personal issue. What happened here is a practical issue. They didn’t go out and start two churches, one teaching baptism and one teaching circumcision. That is not what happened here. Paul and Barnabas were united in doctrine. They were united in what they taught. They had a disagreement in the realm of opinion. And although we certainly regret the pain they went through, we realize that much good was ultimately done. We think of what Paul would go on to write in Romans 8:28, **“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”** Both Paul and Barnabas loved God, and God was able to work even that disagreement together for good in the end. Think, for example, about the addition of Silas to the team. We know that Silas was a Roman

citizen. We don't know that about Barnabas. Remember what happened in Philippi? ***"They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans?"*** (Acts 16:37). What might have happened if Barnabas had been there instead of Silas? Who knows? The bottom line is: Two missionary trips were made instead of one, and much more ground was covered in a much more effective way. God did not cause the disagreement, but he used it for the benefit of the gospel.

**B. There is a second and final benefit I would point out here, and that is: Because of this disagreement, a number of relationships were ultimately strengthened.**

We think of Barnabas and John Mark. Again, we do not have the record of that journey, but we can certainly imagine that these two men, cousins, grew much closer together because they were able to go on their own missionary journey. Perhaps it is that journey that lit a fire under Mark and inspired him to write the gospel account that now bears his name. Tradition tells us that John Mark eventually traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, became an elder in the church, and died as a martyr in Egypt.

But we think especially about Paul and Silas and Timothy. Silas ended up as a co-author of the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians and became very close to the apostle Paul. Timothy also was trained by Paul and became the son that Paul never had. Paul was the spiritual father that Timothy never had. In Philippians 2:22, Paul wrote about Timothy and said, ***"But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father."*** We read Paul's advice to Timothy in the books of 1 and 2 Timothy, and we see an attitude there that seems to be lacking in Paul's relationship with John Mark. We see some patience and tolerance as Timothy learns what it means to preach the gospel, the kind of patience that Paul had learned from experience, the kind of patience that perhaps Paul eventually regretted not showing to Mark.

And so we find two benefits of this disagreement: 1.) More ground was covered, and 2.) Relationships were eventually strengthened.

**Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this passage, we come to the point where the argument itself is over, both men (I'm sure) are hurt by what happened here, but they go their separate ways, and time passes. Paul goes north, and Barnabas goes west. They separate, and as far as we know, they do not talk again, perhaps for many years. Over time, though, as the pain of the disagreement seems to cool down a little bit, they begin to see things in a different way. Looking back on it, maybe they are able to see what we have been able to see this morning, that the separation was actually used by God to do some amazing things.

About ten years later, Paul writes to one of the churches established on this second journey, and in passing he happens to mention Barnabas in a list of fellow workers (1 Corinthians 9:6). But think especially about Mark. Did Paul change his attitude toward Mark also? He certainly did! Fifteen years have passed, Paul is under house arrest in Rome, and in Colossians 4:10 as Paul is wrapping up the letter, he says, ***"Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him)."*** Do we see a little bit of an attitude change there? Several more years pass, Paul is now in prison in Rome, he is writing what will be his very last letter to the young preacher Timothy, and at the end of that letter (in 2 Timothy 4:11), Paul says to Timothy, ***"Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service."*** Nearly 20 years earlier, Paul looked at Mark as a quitter – he abandoned us – but now, at the end of his life, Paul is saying, "Please, bring Mark to see me here in Rome, for he is useful to me. I need him to be here" (paraphrased). This is what God

can do! God can take a bitter disagreement, God can take a bitter disappointment, he can soften our hearts over time, and he can bring people back together.

When we disagree in the realm of opinion, we are not to let it fester, but we need to be open to coming back together. Hopefully it won't take 10 or 15 years as it did with Paul, but our goal is to work things out. In the New Testament, we have this encouragement from both directions. On one hand, if I think that you have sinned against me, if I feel that you have let me down in some way, according to Matthew 18 I have an obligation to go talk to you one-on-one to try to work things out. As we know, however, sometimes the one who is sinned against just quits; sometimes the one who is let down just fades away. And so the New Testament also teaches that if I have a feeling that somebody has something against me, then I also have an obligation to go and try to work things out. Remember what the Lord said in Matthew 5:23-24, ***“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”*** The Lord wants us to be reconciled; the Lord wants us to get along.

The Bible tells us how to get along with each other, but the main point of the Bible is explaining how we can get along with God, and that is where we end our lesson this morning. God has provided a way of salvation. We have sinned, but the sacrifice has already been made. We accept God's offer by believing in Jesus, by turning away from sin, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know. If we need to pray about something in your life right now, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can talk to me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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