

When Personalities Clash

Lesson 6

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DEVOTIONAL

Leslie Flynn wrote a book titled, *Great Church Fights*. I have never seen a copy of it, but the title makes me want to read it. I did read a story that he tells in it of two porcupines in the freezing north woods that huddled together to keep warm. But when they got close, their quills pricked each other, and they had to move apart. They needed each other for the warmth, but they needed each other with their sharp quills.

Church members often are like those porcupines: we need each other, but we needle each other! As Vance Havner observed, there are many “porcupine” Christians—they have their good points, but you can’t get near them!

We all know that we are called to love one another. It doesn’t sound very spiritual to admit that there are Christians that we just don’t like. Their personalities grate on mine. The way that they do things is always counter to the way I do things, which of course is the right way! You cannot get involved in serving the Lord through the local church for very long before you run into someone whose personality clashes with yours.

It is important that you learn to deal with such situations for several reasons. First, the command to love one another is not a minor one! It is the second great commandment and it is inextricably linked to the greatest commandment, to love God. John tells us that if we do not love our brother whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we have not seen (1 John 4:20). Also, Christian unity is not a minor matter. Jesus prayed just before His death that we would be perfected in unity so that the world would know that the Father had sent Him (John 17:23). We can’t just shrug it off!

Also, I have seen many Christians who get discouraged and quit serving the Lord as a result of a clash with another believer. Sometimes they even grow disillusioned or cynical about the Christian life because of the clash that they either observed or experienced in the church. They get hurt and wrongly conclude, “Christianity doesn’t work. Christians are just hypocrites.” And they fall away from the Lord. So it’s important to learn what the Bible teaches about dealing with personality differences so that the enemy does not derail you from following the Lord Jesus.

For our instruction in these matters, Luke honestly reports a clash that occurred between two great men of God, Paul and Barnabas. Frankly, it’s not a pretty picture. I wish that he reported that they both repented of their anger and asked forgiveness of one another, but he does not. I assume from a few later brief references that that did happen, or at least that there was no lingering bitterness. But the clash led to a rupture in the close working relationship between these two godly men. Barnabas here passes off the record of Acts. Both Paul and Barnabas must have grieved over this in the years after this incident. The lesson for us is that ...

Christians must be diligent to maintain unity and to continue serving the Lord in spite of personality clashes.¹

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-38-when-personalities-clash-acts-1536-41>

OPEN IT

1. **Who were some of your childhood friends? What made you connect with them? Do you still have contact with them?**

READ IT

Acts 15:36–16:10

EXPLORE IT

2. **Where did Paul want to go and what did he want to accomplish at the beginning of our passage?**
3. **Who did Barnabas want to take with him? Why didn't Paul agree with Barnabas?**
4. **What do the two men do because of this disagreement?**
5. **Paul's new team visited different churches and shared what information with them?**
6. **What caused Paul to leave Asia Minor and head to Macedonia?**

APPLY IT

LET'S CHECK IN AND SEE HOW THINGS ARE GOING (Acts 15:36)

As we come to the end of our study in Acts 15, we reach the end of one era and the subsequent beginning of another one. Paul's first missionary journey had come to an end and the second one was about to commence—but not without heartache. Nevertheless, God's work continued and the gospel marched forward. In fact, historically, the gospel has reached us as the result of this second missionary thrust.²

² Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/separated-unto-the-gospel/>

It all began when Paul suggested to Barnabas that they revisit the churches in Galatia “to see how they are” (Acts 15:36). Some time had passed; “after some days” in verse 36 may suggest that the winter of A.D. 48 had given way to the spring of A.D. 49, and travel was once again feasible. Communication between Galatia and Antioch was minimal. Merchants traveling east had perhaps brought some news. Paul would have been eager to learn what effect his letter to them (written just before the Jerusalem Council) had achieved. Were they still troubled by what the Judaizers had said in regard to circumcision? Had they capitulated? Were they at odds with each other? Had they heard of the decision reached in Jerusalem that circumcision was not required of Gentile converts (concerning which Paul will elaborate when he gets there [Acts 16: 4])?

In addition, Paul would be eager to know whether they were growing in their faith. Before leaving them, Paul and Barnabas had seen to the appointment of elders in the churches they had established (Acts 14: 23), and they must have been keen to know how well these elders had served the church over the past year or so. Paul will later exhort elders to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that [they] may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Paul must have been wondering whether these elders in Galatia were able to stand up to the pressure of the Judaizing party.

A lot can happen in a year! Paul had a heart for the church. He cared deeply for it, corporately and individually. He would later describe his ministry in Thessalonica as like that of a nursing mother, gently taking care of her children (1 Thessalonians 2:7). Now, in Antioch, his heart yearned to know how his spiritual children were doing. He mentions to Barnabas a return visit, one that Barnabas evidently agreed on.³

- 7. The team planned on visiting the brothers in every city to see how the disciples were doing. The word “visit” in other New Testament uses speaks more of a deep spiritual checkup than small talk and hanging out. What things do you think this spiritual check might have involved?**

- 8. What things can keep Christians today from doing these spiritual checkups on each other, and what good can come if we did them more often?**

- 9. What steps can we take to better personally “visit” others around us?**

³ Thomas, Derek W. H.. *Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries)* (pp. 436–437). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

10. What things can a church do to create a culture that puts a premium on each other's spiritual wellbeing?

BREAKING UP THE BAND (Acts 15:36–40)

At this strategic moment in the history of the church, when it began to radically change from a movement within Judaism to a predominantly Gentile movement, two of its most important visionaries could no longer see eye to eye and parted company—never to work together again. The Devil in the Details Luke gives so few details that we can only guess why the conflict between Paul and Barnabas could not be resolved. Here's what we know: They agreed to revisit the churches they'd planted. But Mark, Barnabas's younger cousin, became the focus of a "contention ... so sharp" that they parted (Acts 15:39 NKJV). The original word means "an angry dispute." **A fight.**

In this corner, wearing white trunks and weighing 200 pounds: **BARNABAS THE ENCOURAGER**—the "people person," champion of young believers no one else wants to help. He wanted to take Mark with them even though he'd jumped ship on the first voyage (Acts 13:13). "Come on, Paul, give the kid another chance!"

In this corner, wearing purple trunks and weighing 190 pounds: **PAUL THE PERFECTIONIST**—the "do or die person," the get-up-and-keep-punching guy, intense, concerned for success of the mission. Mark had blown his chance, leaving them shorthanded on the first trip. "The kid's not dry behind the ears! A quitter! Excess baggage!"⁴

11. To better understand our passage this week and the gravity of what takes place, we must examine the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. Take a moment to read Acts 4:36–37; 9:26–30; 11:19–26; 13:1–3. What do each of these passages tell us about the friendship and partnership these two men experienced?

12. Before Acts 15:36–41, Barnabas was a significant mentor in Paul's life. Who has been a "Barnabas" in your life? Are you a "Barnabas" in the life of someone else?

What concerns or struggles keep you from stepping out and serving in this way? How might that happen?

⁴ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 3367–3379). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

13. It seems like Paul and Barnabas were two very different people with different personalities who had a similar passion for the mission of God. How can personalities be both a strength and weakness when it comes to ministry?

What type of personality do you have? How does this temperament serve you well and where must you be careful?

We cannot be sure why John Mark originally left them in Pamphylia. Most likely it was a combination of things—the realities of missionary life with its ongoing conflicts and discomforts, sickness in Pamphylia, Paul’s growing ascendancy over Barnabas, a pampered upbringing, homesickness. Whatever the reason, Paul considered it desertion! Barnabas, who was John Mark’s cousin (Colossians 4:10), saw the situation much differently. He saw a change in John Mark, who obviously wanted another chance, and Barnabas resented Paul’s rejection of the young man. The result was what verse 39 translates “a sharp disagreement.” The Greek word, *paraxusmos*, is the word from which we derive our English word paroxysm, which denotes violent action or emotion. This was not a mild gentlemen’s disagreement but an intense and passionate conflict!

As to who was to blame, that is not an easy question. Scholars have had paroxysms over it. I feel for Barnabas, and yet Paul is the greatest of the apostles. Perhaps they were both right. No one can rightly blame Barnabas for wanting to give his cousin a second chance, nor can we fault Paul for fearing to trust him again. Our judgment goes with Paul, but our hearts go with Barnabas. According to verse 40, the church sided with Paul, and perhaps that is where we should leave it.⁵

14. John Mark and his participation were at the epicenter of this disagreement. Where would you have sided? Why?

⁵ Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire* (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 3738–3744). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

15. Is it ever right for Christians to fight and separate like this? Does the eventual good that comes from this situation validate their arguing?

What things must we be cautious of when we find ourselves disagreeing with one another?

16. Read 1 Corinthians 9:3–6 and 2 Timothy 4:9–11. What do we learn from this passage that was written years after the book of Acts? What things would need to take place for this type of reconciliation to take place?

Who are you in sharp disagreement with today? What things can you be doing to position yourself for a future reconciliation?

A NEW TEAM FORMS (Acts 15:40–16:5)

Paul and Silas approached their destination from the east, so they came first to Derbe and then to Lystra, just the reverse of the first journey (Acts 14: 6–20). The preachers went from church to church, delivering the decrees and helping establish the believers in the faith. The result was fruit from the witness of the believers so that the churches increased in number daily (see Acts 2:47). It was certainly a most successful tour, but I wonder if any of the believers asked about Barnabas. And what did Paul tell them? Perhaps the best thing that happened at Lystra was the enlistment of Timothy to replace John Mark as Paul’s special assistant. Timothy was probably converted through Paul’s ministry when the apostle first visited Lystra, for Paul called him “my beloved son” (1 Corinthians 4:17) and “my own son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2). Timothy’s mother and grandmother had prepared the way for his decision by being the first in the family to trust Christ (2 Timothy 1:5). Young Timothy undoubtedly witnessed Paul’s sufferings in Lystra (Acts 14:19–20; 2 Timothy 3:10–11) and was drawn by the Lord to the apostle. Timothy was Paul’s favorite companion and coworker (Philippians 2:19–23), perhaps the son Paul never had but always wanted.⁶

⁶ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Daring (Acts 13-28): Put Your Faith Where the Action Is (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 43). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

17. Describe a time when God used a difficult relational situation to bring forth an even better one. How can we use past disagreements to make our future relationships stronger?

Because he had a good report from the churches (1 Timothy 3:7), Timothy was ordained by Paul and added to his “team” (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). Paul’s next step was to have Timothy circumcised, an action that seems to contradict the decision of the Jerusalem Conference. However, there was an important spiritual principle behind Paul’s decision. The decision at the Jerusalem Conference was that it was not necessary to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul did not allow Titus to be circumcised lest the enemy think he was promoting their cause (Galatians 2:1–5). The battle in Jerusalem was over the truth of the gospel, not over the fitness of a man to serve. Paul’s concern with Timothy was not his salvation but his fitness for service. Timothy would be working with both Jews and Gentiles in the churches, and it was essential that he not offend them. That was why Paul had Timothy circumcised (see 1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Again, it was not a matter of Timothy’s salvation or personal character, but rather of avoiding serious problems that would surely become stumbling blocks as the men sought to serve the Lord (Romans 14:13–15). It is a wise spiritual leader who knows how and when to apply the principles of the Word of God, when to stand firm, and when to yield. In the years that followed, Timothy played an important part in the expansion and strengthening of the churches. He traveled with Paul and was often his special ambassador to the “trouble spots” in the work, such as Corinth. He became shepherd of the church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) and probably joined Paul in Rome shortly before the apostle was martyred (2 Timothy 4:21).⁷

18. Why did Paul have Timothy circumcised, and why might some have thought Paul was being hypocritical in light of Acts 15?

What types of things might we have to rid ourselves of so that we might be more effective in our service?

⁷ Ibid.

I HAVE A DREAM (Acts 16:6-10)

Paul now received a vision, so they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” (vv. 8-9) Some say Paul saw a sudden appearance by Dr. Luke and heard his plea for Paul to cross the channel. Some even conjecture that this was a vision of Alexander the Great, the archetype of Macedonia, speaking for his lost race. Whatever the vision encompassed, its meaning was clear: Europe was calling for help—the people of Europe needed the gospel of Christ.

The result is recorded in verse 10: After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. The word translated “concluding” is an old Greek verb that means “to bring together,” “to coalesce or knit together.” As Luke and Paul and company considered the vision in the context of all that had gone before, it all came together and they knew God was calling them to Europe!⁵ This was one of the great turning points of history, and we should thank God for it, for as a result the gospel has come to us in the West. Nothing makes a person strong like hearing someone cry for help! You can be walking down the street completely fatigued so that you would like to lie down on the curb and go to sleep, but then you hear a cry—someone is in trouble!—and you completely forget your weariness. Paul and his associates moved forward in the power of Christ’s strength.⁸

19. Paul received guidance though both positive (vision) and negative (forbidden by the Holy Spirit) means. Describe a time when God used either a positive or negative outcome to lead you where he wanted you to go.

20. We are told that Paul immediately obeyed God and followed His leading. How does one go about hearing from God and being led by Him?

Where might God be leading you? What initial steps can you take this week to obey?

⁸ Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word)* (Kindle Locations 3840-3854). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

Note: This study is compiled, and questions are written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups