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Colossians #22
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Sermon Summary #22

What Should We Do When Christians Clash? Acts 13:13-14; 15:36-41; Colossians 4:7-18; 2 Timothy 4:9-10

What are we to do when Christians clash? I'm not thinking of momentary spats or minor disagreements, but of significant divisions and conflict grounded in equally sincere convictions about what is right and wise. If you've been a Christian for any period of time you've no doubt seen it or, sadly, been embroiled in one of your own.

Once again, one of the admirable things about the Bible is its often brutal honesty, its refusal to gloss over the glitches in believers' lives. There are a number of examples I could cite, but none more pointed than the breakdown between Paul, Barnabas, and Mark, and their subsequent reconciliation. The latter two are mentioned in Colossians 4:10. I should also throw in a certain Demas, whose name appears in v. 14.

These men, together with Tychicus (vv. 7-8), Onesimus (v. 9), Aristarchus (v. 10), Justus (v. 11), Epaphras (vv. 12-13), Luke (v. 14), Archippus (v. 17), and one lady named Nympha (v. 15), are all included in Paul's traditional closing list of those to and from whom he sends his greetings.

As we bring our study of Colossians to a conclusion, I want to focus in detail on the rocky relationship and the glorious reconciliation that occurred with Paul, Barnabas, and Mark. I'll include the defection from Paul (and the faith?) of Demas and contrast this with the way in which Mark proved his faithfulness following a momentary lapse in judgment. There are countless practical lessons we can learn from these men and their struggles. So let's begin.

Paul and Barnabas, on Mark

If we are going to understand and learn from this "clash of Christians" we need to move outside of Colossians and take note of a story that is recorded for us in Acts 15. Our principal characters are Paul (who needs no comment), Barnabas, and Mark.

Barnabas was the kind of man that everyone would want as a best friend. No matter how bad things got, no matter how low and lousy you might feel, no matter how badly you may have failed, when your world stinks, Barnabas is the sort who brings a sweet aroma to life. You can always count on him being there. He won't close an eye to your sin. In fact, he'll rebuke you if needed, but you know it's because he really cares.

Much is said of Barnabas in the New Testament, all of which is worthy of imitation. He is described as generous in Acts 4:36-37 (if you're in financial stress, he'll give you what he's got, even if it isn't much). He has an uncanny knack for encouraging others when they are in distress ("Barnabas," as most of you know, actually means "Son of Encouragement"), as Acts 4:36 and 11:23 bear witness (cf. Acts 9:27). He was a "good" man (Acts 11:24; what a brief but glorious epitaph!). He was "filled with the Spirit" and "full of faith" (Acts 11:24; i.e., rock solid and spiritually steady, no matter the circumstance, always looking confidently to the trustworthiness and sufficiency of Jesus). He was a teacher, prophet, evangelist, and apostle (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:14; obviously quite gifted!). Perhaps best of all, he could be counted on, which is to say, he was reliable (see Acts 11:29-30; 12:25).

Then there is Mark, called "John Mark" (it was common to have two names, one acceptable to Greeks and Romans and the other Jewish). He lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary, in his whose home prayer meetings were regularly held (Acts 12:12). We know he was the cousin of Barnabas (as Paul indicates in Colossians 4:10) and was selected by Paul (no doubt on Barnabas's recommendation) to accompany them on their missionary journeys (Acts 12:25).

The problem, the "clash" if you will, was precipitated by something recorded for us in Acts 13:13-14 during Paul's second missionary journey. There we read that "Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John [Mark] left them and returned to Jerusalem, but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch

in Pisidia.” Luke doesn’t tell us at this point why John Mark “left them”, nor does he suggest at this stage that his decision was wrong or sinful.

Why did Mark leave? There are any number of possibilities. For example, he may have been homesick. Perhaps he missed his mother, their spacious home in Jerusalem, and the comfort provided by the servants present there.

Others believe that he had come to resent Paul for eclipsing his cousin Barnabas in importance and fame. Paul was now the acknowledged leader of the group. Was it familial jealousy that drove this young man?

The explanation could be as simple as physical exhaustion. Mark may not have been accustomed to the rigors of travel, or perhaps he was a bit lazy, at least by Paul’s standards. Was he having second thoughts about his calling as a missionary (“Did I really hear God?”). Was he discouraged (“This isn’t what I had in mind at all!”)?

When Paul reached the cities of south Galatia, he was quite ill (see Galatians 4:13-15). He may have contracted malarial fever which could be reduced by leaving the climate of the low-lying coastal plain and going to the coolness of the Taurus plateau some 3,500 ft. above sea level. A few have argued that perhaps Mark thought Paul was foolish in making the decision to go north over the mountains and decided it was unwise to accompany him.

There is also the possibility that as a loyal member of the church in Jerusalem he disagreed with Paul’s policy of evangelizing Gentiles and granting them equal status in the church. Some suggest it was Mark who provoked the Judaizers in Jerusalem into opposing Paul (cf. Acts 15:1ff; but we have no explicit evidence to support this).

Other possible explanations are his fear of bandits, thieves, and muggers who infested the Taurus mountains into which Paul insisted they go (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:26), or perhaps his fear of persecution (cf. Acts 14:19).

Whatever the reason for Mark’s refusal to continue with Paul and Barnabas, whatever excuse he used to make a hasty retreat to Jerusalem and the comforts of home, **Paul took it as a sign of weakness and immaturity and unreliability.** So did Barnabas, I suspect, although later they would differ greatly on how best to deal with the problem.

Following the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), 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” (Acts 15:36). Barnabas wanted Mark to come along, “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” (Acts 15:37-38).

Note well what happened next: “And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord” (Acts 15:39-40). It testifies to the historical reliability of Acts that Luke makes no effort to cover up this dispute. He’s not afraid to face reality or point a finger at warts on the face of the church.

Barnabas would not have disputed the fact that Mark blew it badly when he deserted them in Cyprus. Sin is sin. He no doubt agreed with Paul that Mark failed miserably on his first outing, but he also believed Mark had sincerely repented and should be welcomed back and given a second chance.

There’s no reason to think Paul doubted Mark’s sincerity in repenting. But the great apostle could not afford to risk the lives of others and the success of the mission on a man who, in his opinion, had yet to prove himself reliable and trustworthy in the heat of battle. Perhaps Paul said to Barnabas (using modern lingo): “When the going gets tough, the tough get going; but Barnabas, don’t you remember Cyprus? When the going got tough there, Mark turned tailed and ran away. It’s not that I don’t love the young man, but too much is at stake to trust him this early in his recovery.”

Who was right, Paul or Barnabas or both? Paul believed that Mark needed to prove his reliability before being entrusted with such an awesome responsibility. That’s probably true. But Barnabas believed he also needed encouragement and love and acceptance. Again, no argument there. But with neither man willing to concede, the split was unavoidable.

So what ultimately happened with Mark? How did he end up with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome? And how is it that Paul now commends him to the church in Colossae (Col. 4:10). And what lessons can we learn from it all?

Luke describes the incident between Paul and Barnabas as a “*sharp disagreement*” (Acts 15:39). I don’t know, but it may have sounded something like this:

Barnabas: “Paul! You’re being unreasonable. I know you’re a man of conviction, but for heaven’s sake ease up a bit.”

Paul: “I may be unreasonable in your estimation, Barnabas, but you are showing a distinct lack of wisdom. Don’t let the fact that he’s your cousin blind you to his failures. We need to think first and foremost about the welfare of this ministry God has entrusted to us.”

Barnabas: “I am thinking of the ministry. But Mark is a sensitive and loving young man. Your inflexibility could crush his spirit. Must you be so harsh?”

Paul: “Must you be so soft? I love Mark. Really, I do. But you’re letting your compassion override your convictions.”

Barnabas: “And you’re letting your principles override your pity.”

In any case, the split must have been painful for everyone involved. I suspect even Mark felt guilty for being the cause of a separation between these two friends and co-workers. But let’s learn from what happened. There are five valuable lessons we can ill-afford to ignore.

Practical Lessons to Learn from the “Sharp Disagreement”

First, we mustn’t forget that Paul and Barnabas, not just Mark, are also human and prone to sin. I can’t get over the fact that two apostles, that’s right, apostles(!), are engaged in a verbal brawl. I’m not in the least suggesting this justifies such behavior in us or that what occurred wasn’t grievous to the heart of God. But it reminds us that no one in this life achieves perfection or rises above the promptings of the flesh. These two men had worked miracles by the Spirit of God. They had laid hands on the sick and healed them. They both prayed in tongues (at least Paul did). They both loved Jesus. Yet here they are shouting angrily at each other!

If you had witnessed this clash, what conclusions would you have drawn? Or let’s bring it into the twenty-first century. If you were a new Christian, visiting a local church for the first time, and you happened upon such an argument in the parking lot or even the foyer of the church, what might you think?

Perhaps: “These men obviously can’t be Christians.”

Or perhaps: “I won’t believe anything either of them teaches. They are obviously disqualified from instructing others when they can’t get along with each other.”

Or maybe: “Who appointed these guys to be missionaries? Someone needs to re-evaluate the screening process!”

Or again: “I’ll bet you God never blesses or anoints either of them again. No more signs and wonders through their hands!”

Or lastly: “Hypocrites! The church is full of them. I’ll never again darken the door of this place as long as people like that are around.”

If nothing else, we learn from this not to judge too quickly or draw decisive conclusions about the goodness of people from a singular incident.

Second, is there anything we can learn from Paul’s position? I think his decision reminds us that you don’t entrust the young and immature with major tasks (cf. 1 Timothy 3:10). Don’t push people into ministry or positions of leadership

and authority who may not be capable of bearing the burden or dealing with the pressure. A proven track record and proven character are indispensable.

Can we learn something important from Barnabas? Certainly. We learn that even those who fail are not to be abandoned and forever spurned. They are to be lovingly rebuked and corrected and then encouraged until conviction grips their hearts and repentance is forthcoming. We learn that failure such as this is not grounds for permanent exclusion from ministry. More on this later.

Third, observe how God providentially brought good out of this tragic turn of events. With Paul and Barnabas splitting up and going their separate ways, two missionary teams instead of one are unleashed on the unbelieving world. Paul took Silas with him, while Barnabas took Mark. We must never justify our failures or sins by appealing to the overriding role of divine providence, but it is reassuring to know that *God can redeem for his glory even the most petty as well as substantive clashes among his children.*

Fourth, there are important lessons to learn from the experience of Mark himself. It would appear that although Mark abandoned them, he has returned on his own initiative. This was a courageous and humbling act on his part, demonstrative of the reality of his repentance.

Note also that Mark was not only received back by Paul, but was restored to ministry as well! In Colossians 4:10 Paul sends the church greetings from Mark and adds this comment: “concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him.” Evidently Mark’s restoration had not been fully acknowledged by all. I suspect that some in Colossae were suspicious of him, which is why Paul insists that they receive him warmly and wholeheartedly.

If that weren’t enough to restore confidence in Mark, Paul explicitly calls him his “fellow worker” in Philemon 24. Better still is what Paul wrote to Timothy in his second epistle. Remember, Paul is in prison in Rome, perhaps only weeks, at most months, away from execution. Virtually everyone had either abandoned him or left for other ministry opportunities (cf. 2 Timothy 4:9-10). “Luke alone is with me” (2 Timothy 4:11a), wrote Paul.

It’s a bit depressing, isn’t it? Paul is at the end of his life. His ministry is nearly over. Of all the people he could have asked to come and support and encourage him, guess whom he mentions? *“Get Mark(!) and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry”* (2 Timothy 4:11b). Mark? Useful? For ministry? Indeed! Isn’t God’s grace amazing?

Fifth, how was Mark restored to ministry? I suspect there were at least *three human contributors* through whom the Spirit worked.

There was, first of all, Barnabas and his constant encouragement and friendship.

Then there was Peter, Mark’s spiritual father (1 Peter 5:13). Peter knew a bit about failure himself! He knew the joy of restoration as well. No doubt his advice and prayers and support proved invaluable to Mark on his journey back.

Finally, Paul’s principles, his rebuke, and the discipline on which he insisted must also have played a role (“Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy,” Proverbs 27:5-6). I suspect Mark would have been the first to say that all three men were indispensable to him.

The Distressing Defection of Demas

We’ve learned much from the clash of Paul and Barnabas over Mark. But there’s one more lesson to note. It comes by way of a painful contrast.

Among those listed in the concluding paragraph of Colossians is a man named *Demas* (Colossians 4:14). He, too, was with Paul in Rome, faithfully serving the apostle alongside of Mark, Luke, Epaphras, and others. But not for long.

Is there a more painful experience than being abandoned by a friend? One struggles to find words adequate for the distress that is felt when a close, trusted companion and fellow-worker (see Philemon 24) walks away.

It's important to remember that this was Paul's first Roman imprisonment when conditions were not so threatening. But things were to change. When Paul wrote again from prison in Rome, his life was in the balance. Here are his words to his spiritual son, Timothy: "Do your best to come to me soon. For *Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica*" (2 Timothy 4:9-10). Ouch! Double ouch!!

Was Demas a "convenient" Christian, one who was happy to follow Jesus and assist the apostle so long as it was rewarding and safe? We can't be sure, but it's clear that Demas wanted nothing to do with Paul. The verb translated "deserted" in 2 Timothy 4:10 implies not simply that Demas had "left" but had "left him in the lurch," had abandoned and forsaken him.

Paul would have recalled the wisdom of Solomon: "Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips" (Proverbs 25:19). Nothing hurts quite like the disloyalty and betrayal of someone you trusted. It's like a decaying, rotten tooth and a palsied, disjointed foot. Not only are they functionally useless (for chewing and walking), they hurt!

For some of you, no doubt, your experience with this sort of person has made you hesitant to trust another. Perhaps you've closed your heart to starting new friendships or found yourself keeping folk at arm's length. But Paul didn't let the betrayal and abandonment of Demas and others scare him off or sour him to friendship altogether. He didn't say, "Oh, Timothy, how do I know you won't abandon me like Demas did?" There's an important lesson in that.

Demas abandoned Paul in his hour of need because he had fallen "in love with this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10a). He preferred material prosperity to spiritual blessings. Comfort and wealth and safety meant more to him than the advance of the gospel and the welfare of the apostle.

Practical Lessons

What lessons might we learn from the contrast between Demas and Mark?

First, when you look on these two men for the first time, Demas appeared faithful and loyal while Mark gave every indication of cowardice and weakness. But as time passed, their situations reversed. Demas proved himself to be disloyal and unreliable and Mark grew into the sort of trusted friend whom Paul wanted at his side in his final days on earth.

Don't be hasty in making snap judgments about people. Initially, Paul thought Demas would never leave and Mark would never be of use. Now, Demas has left and Mark is back! We're reminded by this that more important than how you start a race is how you finish. It's been said before and I'll say it again: the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint! So let's be careful and not place excessive responsibility on those who do well at first, nor give up entirely on those who appear to have slipped at the starting line.

Second, some say Mark was not a Christian when he abandoned Paul and Barnabas but converted later on. They also argue that Demas was a Christian but lost his salvation when he deserted Paul for love of the world.

But this is based on the assumption that a true believer is incapable of the sin of fear or cowardice (Mark's transgression; Peter's too!). It also assumes that someone who is born again cannot fall into the grip of materialism and self-protection (which may well have been Demas's struggle).

I suspect, but can't prove, that Demas was a Christian with whom God dealt no differently than he did with Mark. He would have come under the conviction of the Spirit and felt the call to repentance. Short of his restoration, divine discipline would have ensued. Was he restored? We don't know. There are other instances in Scripture where discipline is temporally (but not spiritually) fatal (cf. Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30-32). In the case of Demas, the Bible is silent and we must be content with that.

Third, and finally, Barnabas received Mark back. Peter received Mark back. Paul received Mark back. The Church as a whole received Mark back. But what about God? *God used him to write the gospel of his Son!* This miserable failure who initially proved so unreliable was received and restored by God to fulfill a task of awesome and eternal significance. As I said before, isn't grace amazing!

Conclusion

There is an important lesson to learn and great encouragement available to us from the story of Mark's sinful failure and his restoration and reconciliation with Paul.

In Glenn Packiam's forthcoming book, *Blessed, Broken, Given: How Your Story Becomes Sacred in the Hands of Jesus*, Packiam describes a conversation he had with friends in his home after a meal. One of them shared a story about an old Japanese art of mending broken pottery. It is called, *Kintsugi* and means "golden joinery." It's the art of joining broken pieces of pottery with a liquid resin that resembles gold. The result is a bowl or vase that is more beautiful, more aesthetically complex, and more valuable than the original piece.

Packiam writes: "Isn't that amazing? The new piece with golden seams became so popular among Japanese art collectors in the fifteenth century that some were even accused of purposely breaking pottery in order to repair it with gold. That sounds like grace. Grace that takes what is broken and puts it back together in such a way that it is more beautiful and more valuable than it was before."

Here is what it looks like.

I think that's how God intends for us to look at Mark. He was broken. His sinful failure produced a crack in the pottery of his soul. But the Holy Spirit mended him. The Holy Spirit healed him. The Holy Spirit restored him to ministry and usefulness and even used him to write one of our four gospel accounts of the life of Jesus.

And God can do the same for you. All it takes is your repentance and humility. Those of you who are convinced that your sin or your failure has forever disqualified you from doing anything of good in the church or for the sake of others, need to listen closely to Mark's story. If you do, and if you embrace God's forgiveness and the power of his healing love, the pottery of your soul can become more beautiful than it ever was before.