

The Unfolding | A Journey Through Acts

“Forgiving Hurts”

Acts 15:36-41 & Matthew 18:15-20

November 16, 2014

Acts 15:36-41

36 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." 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

1. Introduction

- Camping: Story of reconciliation
- We all shake our heads at this - and we need to address it for what it is: *it's wrong*.
- Greek word for “sharp disagreement”:
 - Medical field: “convulsion”
 - “Overtones” of “Severely heightened emotions, red and distorted faces, loud voices, things said that were better left unsaid. A sorry sight.”¹

¹ Wright, N.T. Acts For Everyone, Part 2. 53.

- Paul probably shook his head when he looked back at this. And wrote with sober experience when, years later, he instructed the Ephesians, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (5:26-27). Or when he told the Colossians to rid themselves of anger (3:8)
- Often used to rationalize everything from petty disagreements that we use to end relationships all the way to church splits. It becomes a convenient verse for us when we find ourselves in need of a proof text to sanction our resistance to behave honorably and humbly in our relationships.

2. What the text does not say and what it does say:

What The Text Does NOT Say:	What The Text Does Say (or Suggests):
That Paul & Barnabas left the church at Antioch;	Paul & Barnabas had a disagreement;
That Paul & Barnabas' relationship was shattered;	Paul & Barnabas' disagreement became heated;
That Paul & Barnabas failed to reconcile;	Their disagreement concerned mission/ministry;
That Paul & Barnabas refused to labor together long term;	It is likely that Paul & Barnabas fellowshipped together again at a later time;
That the church was divided because of this;	God sovereignly exploited this disagreement to advance the gospel more widely;
That one or the other was right or wrong;	Paul wanted the people on his team to be trustworthy (i.e. Timothy):
That God sanctions ugly interactions;	Barnabas loved John Mark, his cousin (Col. 4:10), and wanted to give him another chance;
That the priority of evangelism & discipleship renders relational reconciliation meaningless;	We know that Paul and Mark worked together again (2 Timothy 4:11)

- Luke's inclusion of this story isn't an affirmation of dissension, but a warning to us all learn from this; to avoid this.
- I love the way Luke makes no attempt to give us a sanitized version of church history.
- We need to learn how to disagree and a God glorifying way. What we typically see are Christians who disagree and then bring their relationships effectively to an end (this doesn't always mean that they stop attending the same church, but rather, they cease fellowshipping with one another).

- At this point, I think it's appropriate to turn our attention to one such text regarding this issue.

5. What do the scriptures teach about relationship management?

- Matthew 18:15-20

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

- Don't consult other people first - go directly to that person
- The goal is to gain your brother (or sister); not to vent anger
- Which means that we must approach a confrontation with much:
 - Humility...in our tone (but that alone isn't enough because we can be humble in tone and not humble in reality);
 - Humility...in view of ourselves (we must have painstakingly searched our own hearts first for any insecurity or hyper-sensitivity through which we might be interpreting another person's actions...Before we ever consider asking someone else to repent, we should have already poured our hearts out in repentance before God.)

16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

- Two or three witnesses refers to the Old Testament law about witnesses. As one commentator wisely stated, “This, of course, is a reality check on your own judgment; you should choose people who are prepared to tell you some uncomfortable truths...”²

² Wright, N.T. Matthew For Everyone, Part 2. 35.

- The idea is that when you confront someone, godly people must be there to help **adjudicate** the matter righteously and keep the parties from further exacerbating the issue with outbursts of wrath and unreasonable arguing.
- But when a person is completely resistant to repentance, even after being addressed by several righteously motivated people, it's got to go to another level by bringing in the leadership and perhaps even the church. To be **clear**, this concerns issues in which the church is being poisoned or a member is being defrauded or someone is involved in deviant sin. (The **binding and loosing** referenced in verse 17 means to permit and to forbid, in terms of restoring a repentant sinner or, God forbid, removing a poisonous influence from the church.)
- Considering someone a **gentile or tax collector** may seem harsh. It even seems "un-Christian" to reject a person from our fellowship. But let's remember that when this happens - and leadership should only come to this decision with the utmost patience after desperately urging a sinning brother or sister to repent - when this happens, this person has already rejected Christ by refusing to repent of sin.
- On a **side note**, before we get too self-righteous, let's remember that we all practice this. We can be very creative in how we distance ourselves from each other and deaden our fellowship functionally rejection one another while smiling at each other at church and enthusiastically saying, "How are you, brother?"
- So **discipleship** is in view here - restoring a person to faithful obedience to Jesus. It's not merely about "smoothing things out."

19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

- Then comes a famous verse about **two or three** being gathered together and God blessing that gathering with his presence. Contrary to popular notions, this has little to do with prayer meetings and church services as it is often applied to. Rather, the idea here is that **God, the judge**, is among us, watching how we handle our relationships, the way we treat his holy community (regardless of how messy it is). He is present

and evaluates the condition of our hearts. This should sober us in those instances when we are reticent to follow the narrow, hard, and godly way of managing our relationships and, instead, opt for the world's way.

- **Illustration:** Confrontation as a youth worker about 19-20 years ago (that confrontation opened up a new discipleship pathway for me...it equipped me to begin addressing a sin in my life in order to avoid hurting others in the future).

6. What about sin that isn't necessarily insidious; that doesn't warrant the casting out of that person from the community?

- How do we handle the tension that issues from personality, preference & philosophy?
- 1 Cor. 6:7: "To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"
 - "Suffer the loss" when at an impasse
 - Keller on forgiveness³:

"Forgiveness is to bear the cost of the misdeed yourself...Forgiveness means refusing to make [your offender] pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are now absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out on the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death. Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism."

6. Challenge: Why do we do this?

1. Command: We live this way because it's Jesus' command and we are his disciples.
2. Consolation: We live this way to console the broken-hearted among us.

³ Keller, Timothy. The Reason For God. 187-89.

3. Consummation: We live this way as New Creations in Christ in anticipation of the New Creation.