

## “The Opportunity in Conflict”

I remember Dave Ramsey telling some version of a story of two older sisters who lived in the same house and each needed an orange for separate baking recipes. Only problem: there was only one orange left and no time to get to the store before guests arrived. As these sisters did from time to time they fought. In this case it was about the orange. Much time was spent trying to tell the other that her recipe deserved the orange more. Emotions ran high and tensions filled the room. In time a revelation finally changed the course of things. Turns out, one of the sisters needed the orange while the other one only needed the peels.

My point in sharing this today is how easily we can turn just about anything into a good fight. Let me tell you another one that is given to us from Acts 15:36-41. <sup>36</sup> Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” <sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, <sup>38</sup> but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. <sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement, but we are also told that it was *sharp*. Folks, they had a fight. It was emotional. It was heated. Paul didn't believe that John Mark was up to being part of the new trip because he had walked out on the mission in Pamphylia. Barney saw that John Mark still had potential and thought that he needed to have a second shot at it. These events are mentioned in Acts 15 because they are relevant to the fact that two missionary groups instead of one were not a result of this disagreement. More ground was covered.

Beginning in Acts 15 I hope to begin a series that addresses conflict. To start off with I want to talk about what did not happen with Paul and Barnabas. First, it is not said that it became a competition where one or both rally supporters within the church to their side in order to pressure the other to give in. Typically, today, too many Christians too quickly turn an argument into a contest and assembles a huddle of people who would agree with us. Such things usually heighten emotions as each side talks themselves into greater heights of anguish and about how the “other side” is so wrong. From there it becomes like a campaign fueled by emotions. “Vote for me.” It's a very divisive approach.

Secondly, Paul and Barnabas did not make it all about themselves. The disagreement did not become an issue of who was a better apostle as it once did with the disciples at the Last Supper. We remember how Jesus had to regularly demonstrate that being a follower of Jesus was not about sitting in places of honor in heaven. The disagreement in Acts 15 was sharp in this case because what was at stake was the mission of the Church. Both Paul and Barnabas were very much in agreement about the mission of the Church. Paul and Barnabas didn't stress their personal reputations or their authority or their personal importance. Instead, they clearly defined the problem and came up with a mutual solution.

I would propose that one looks at conflict not as something to be avoided, mainly because, no one goes with conflict in life. That's not realistic. I think that conflict is an opportunity. Let's use Acts 15 again.

First thing is that it becomes an opportunity to identify something important to us. John Mark abandoned his place in Pamphylia but Barnabas was aware of John Mark's character. By the way, this is the same Barnabas who advocated for Paul shortly after his conversion and introduced him to a very skeptical church in Acts 9. We are not told why Mark did what he did but his cousin Barnabas knew his potential, forgave him, and disciplined him further on the next missionary trip. The result was years later, he is with Paul, who calls him a “fellow worker” (Philemon 1:24). Near the end of Paul's life, Paul sends a request to Timothy from a Roman prison: “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Paul eventually recognized saw a maturity in Mark and leaned on him for ministry. Mark clearly needed more training or something and what he got helped not only Mark but eventually Paul and the mission of the Church.

If we find ourselves becoming emotionally invested in a conflict perhaps something important needs more attention in us or in another. Emotions signal such things. Along with this we may want to put ourselves

in the shoes of the one we are conflict with and ask ourselves what may be important to them. The whole thing becomes an opportunity if we can learn what this may be. Finding out what's valued as important brings a lot of clarity. It may not bring resolution right away but its good to have the right beginning point because the focus has a chance to shift from feelings to intelligent discussion and a solution.

Another reason conflict may be an opportunity is that it may lead to a greater appreciation of another. Paul and Barnabas knew that it was important to distinguish the person from the real issue. One issue can totally skew a relationship. That same issue can also make a relationship much stronger. While Paul and Barnabas disagreed sharply about Mark the failure of Mark did not become Mark's identity. The fight did not make Paul the enemy of Barnabas. Barnabas took Mark under his wing and Paul agreed to let Mark rebuild his trustworthiness under Barnabas. Paul trusted the plan because he trusted Barnabas and in time Paul grew to appreciate Mark as much as Barnabas.

If our focus is to win a contest we lose. The moment a conflict in a relationship becomes a contest its already a problem. Remember who we are talking with; a spouse, a child, a friend, or even myself, someone we care about. Start with the relationship and assume the best. Put the best construction on your words. Don't let your mind go negative about a person even if they are resistant to your assessment of the issue. Place the matter in the hands of the Lord and promise at least to give some thought to what the other person is disagreeing about. As with Paul and Barnabas, it may not be something we agree on.

Finally, ask, "How can we honor the Lord in this?" Every disagreement is a chance to grow in faith and to honor the Lord especially between two Christians. If we seek to honor the Lord we go a long way to avoid making the matter more complicated by what we may have said and done. Sometimes when emotions run high, we may even say, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are saying or doing right now." If one aim is to honor the Lord then we may better remember the deep grace and forgiveness already provided for us in Jesus.

So, we begin our topic today with Paul and Barnabas today-brothers in the Lord. Conflict can be a huge opportunity. Conflict among Christians (And that is who I talking about today) has a greater chance as an opportunity if we are not quick to make it a competition or about ourselves. But if we are seeking the Kingdom of God in our conflicts just maybe everything else maybe added as well. Something good is possible if that is our goal in any given conflict. May God bless us this week in His peace.

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John 3:30