

Acts 15: 36-41

People God Uses

5/22/16

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Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.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.

(Pastor Prays)

I love the Bible for many reasons. One of those reasons is that the Bible always gives us an unvarnished look at our heroes: Moses in his anger, Abraham in his deceit, Jacob in his tricks, and even David in his infidelity. The Bible always gives us real pictures of the flaws found in the ones we revere.

This passage is no different as we take a hard look at two men we love: Paul and Barnabas, two "leading lights" of Christianity. F.F. Bruce was right when he said, "this story does not make for pleasant reading," reminding us once again that even the best people have significant flaws and the best of friends can have intense disagreements.

But this story is not so much about an argument as it is about the Gospel of Christ and how the life and death and resurrection of Jesus over rules our failures. It's through our mistakes that God refines and teaches and humbles us for Gospel usefulness. Success is great, no question, but failure is where we learn and grow and seek the living God. We don't desire failure, but by God's grace, we don't waste it either.

It's interesting to note that in this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, Luke is careful not to assign blame or choose sides. Instead, he gets us past that and shows us

how God overrules the break-up and moves the Gospel forward. Paul and Barnabas were a great team, and this story is about them breaking up. But underneath that is the story of the power of the Gospel and how God uses all kinds of people to expand His kingdom and how great friends can disagree, but ministry can't stop. The truth is...

God's Perfect Plan is to Use Imperfect People

In the text there are 3 kinds of people. Let's start with the most likeable first:

God Uses Gracious People

Up to this point in the narrative, you can't say "Paul" without saying "Barnabas. V. 35 tells us Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch teaching and preaching the word of the Lord. They were a team ever since Barnabas got Paul out of Tarsus. God used Barnabas' relational skills coupled with Paul's brilliance and drive to produce dramatic results. Difficulty and triumph welded them together.

In v. 36, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are." They are going to go visit missionaries. It sounded good to Barnabas, so in v. 37 Luke tells us that Barnabas wanted to take with them "John called Mark."

That's grace. O you know why I say grace? Let's read v. 38 to find out: *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.* Back in Chapter 12, John Mark, who was Barnabas' cousin, joined Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey only to leave them in Chapter 13. He gave up. He just went home. We are not told why and evidently Paul felt like there was a defect in Mark's character that made him unreliable and unsuitable for the work. In essence, Paul wrote him off.

But Barnabas, the man who didn't give up on Paul, wouldn't give up on John Mark either. Barnabas showed faith in John Mark when everybody else, including Paul, lost theirs. I want to stop right here and say, God uses *gracious* people, men and women who don't write people off when they fall or sin or quit or go home. The Gospel we believe is a Gospel of grace that makes us reach for the quitters and the lazy and the addicts and the faint-of-heart.

Every one of us here has experienced that kind of grace. If you're a Christian, then God came after you when you were rejecting His life and fighting His will, and when you came to Christ it was by His grace you became a person of grace.

So I wonder who you have written off that you can circle back around and extend grace to? Maybe someone that has proved to be a bad person who needs Christ and you're going to have to fight through all their deficiencies and share the Gospel of Grace and do it without compromising God's truth. God uses Barnabas to reach and develop John Mark, and Mark will become one of the most important people in the history of Christianity.

God's perfect plan is to use imperfect people and he uses gracious people. There is something else here...

God Uses Driven People

Verses 38 & 39 do not present a flattering picture of the apostle Paul. They show him to be unyielding, unmerciful and unrelenting. In his estimate, the mission was too important. Proverbs 25:19 says, *Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.* And that is just what he thought of Mark, so much so that he was willing to separate from the best friend he ever had, a hard-headed, difficult person. Some of the greatest Christian leaders were difficult people.

Martin Luther, the father of the reformation, revealed that about himself. He wrote about himself, "I am rough, boisterous, stormy and altogether warlike, fighting against innumerable monsters and devils. I am born for the removing of stump and stones, cutting away thistles and thorns and clearing wild forests." That's a pretty good self-assessment and it could have described Paul. And yet, God used him to turn the world upside down for Christ.

Before we get too hard on Paul, the Bible tells us that Paul chose Silas (great leader) and the church there – the brothers -- commended him. They sent him out. They commissioned him. So they were still behind him. What if you are a believer and you are this kind of person? What do you do if you are a Christian and yet so driven that sometimes you forget to show Christ's love? We can learn from Paul's life. He obviously had a tendency to be warlike, to quote Martin Luther.

I'd like to suggest 4 ways or things you can do to be useful for God's kingdom, 4 things from Paul's life that apply to almost anyone:

1. **Be aware of your need for grace.** Paul tells Timothy, "I am the foremost of sinners." Once you really understand the grace it took to save you, pride is killed.
2. **Learn dependence on Christ.** Paul said, "For me to live is Christ and die is gain." You find ways to saturate your life with the Gospel: Prayer, reading on the Puritans, Reading the Bible, having a ministry, being generous.
3. **Learn thankfulness.** Start thanking God. What if God took everything away that you had *not* thanked him for? Paul mentions his thankfulness to God throughout his letter, and in Romans, he devotes the whole last chapter to thanking people. Being thankful.
4. **Learn daily crucifixion.** Isn't that what Paul said in Galatians 2:20? *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Crucify – kill– pride, drive, self-importance, need to be in control, thinking you are always right. It's gotta be crucified.

That's when a perfect God starts using you, an imperfect person. God's perfect plan is to use imperfect people. God uses gracious people. God uses driven people.

God Uses Broken People

There is one other person mentioned in the passage and he's the one who caused the split: John Mark. We met him briefly back in Chapters 12 & 13. And here Barnabas wants to give him a second chance. In fact, Barnabas does give him a second chance after the sharp disagreement in v. 39.

Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. Mark was a failure, the quitter, the guy who made the regrettable choice to walk away from a golden opportunity. But now God has given him a second chance.

Mark was a broken man, but God wasn't done with him and after he had spent time with Barnabas, later on we hear his name often mentioned by Paul. In fact, Paul tells

Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:11, *Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.* Who would have dreamed that Paul would ever say that? And afterward, Mark would write the Gospel of Mark in our Bible.

God used this broken quitter of a man, and if God can use John Mark, he can use you. He uses broken people. Isn't that how salvation works? In our sin we are broken and separated from God and in His goodness, He comes. Jesus comes and lives perfectly then takes our place, receiving the judgment of God on the cross, dying for sinners.

God raised Him from the dead and we are saved by trusting in Christ alone. It's God's perfect plan to use imperfect people. It starts with faith – believing.

(Pastor shares the Gospel and prays)