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WHEN PERSONALITIES CLASH

Acts 15:36-41

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July 22, 2001

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Acts Lesson 38

When Personalities Clash Acts 15:36-41

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 *needled* 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.

I want to make four observations about our text:

1. Spiritual maturity does not erase personality differences.

We often naively think that if we all were just spiritually mature, we would never clash with one another. I agree that generally our clashes should be less frequent and less severe in proportion to our spiritual maturity. But until we are perfectly sanctified in heaven, I’m afraid that the little ditty will always be true,

To dwell above with the saints we love, O that will be glory.
But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that’s a different story!

Note three things about the men involved in this clash:

- A. Personality clashes can arise between men who share the same basic theology.

Paul and Barnabas had just come away from the Jerusalem Council, where the core issue of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone had been affirmed. Both men firmly agreed about this and other central doctrines of the Christian faith. But their personalities clashed over a practical matter of ministry, whether to take Mark along on the second journey.

- B. Personality clashes can arise between men who are godly and committed to the cause of Christ.

Paul and Barnabas were not new believers. Both men had walked with God for years. They were both fully committed to doing the will of God, no matter what the cost. They had risked their lives for the sake of Christ (15:26), and yet they clashed.

- C. Personality clashes can arise between men who have served together for years in the cause of Christ.

Paul and Barnabas had a long history of serving together. It was Barnabas who had gone to Paul and listened to his testimony when every Christian in Jerusalem was holding him at arm's length. It was Barnabas again who went to Tarsus to look for Paul and brought him back to labor with him in the ministry at Antioch. The two men had been set apart and commissioned together to go out on the first missionary journey. On that historic mission, they had suffered together for the cause of Christ.

Also, this clash erupted out of godly concern on Paul's part to revisit the churches that they had seen God establish on that first journey, to see how they were doing in the Lord. Both men had a heart for the wellbeing of the churches. And yet these two teammates, who had labored together and suffered together for many years in the cause of Christ, clashed. Spiritual maturity does not erase personality differences that can lead to strong clashes.

- 2. Personality differences can lead to personality clashes that can cause us to sin.

The question always comes up, "Who was right in this clash?" Since Luke, who was obviously close to Paul, did not blame Barnabas or Paul, we need to be careful. The slight nod goes to Paul as being right, since it is stated that the brethren commended Silas and Paul to the grace of God, but nothing is said about Barnabas and Mark, except that they sailed away to Cyprus.

In light of the rest of Scripture, I think we can say that both men were right, but also, both men were wrong. Paul was right in that he was a rugged pioneer, venturing into enemy strongholds, and he didn't need someone on his team who would run in the heat of the battle. He needed committed warriors who would not

flinch in the face of hardship and adversity. Mark had not proven himself to be such a man. He should not have gone with Paul.

Barnabas was right in that he saw the undeveloped potential in Mark, and he wanted to extend God's grace to this young man in spite of his earlier mistake in deserting the cause. History proved him right, in that Paul himself later told the Colossian church to welcome Mark (Col. 4:10). In his final imprisonment, Paul told Timothy to pick up Mark and bring him with him, because he was useful to Paul for ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). So Barnabas' efforts to reclaim Mark for the cause paid off. Both men were right.

But, also, both men were wrong, and I believe they fell into sin in the way they dealt with this disagreement. They both stubbornly dug in their heels and refused to give in at all to the other man's point of view. I'm sure that they both would have said that they were standing on a matter of principle. But they could have graciously agreed to disagree and have parted ways in a spirit of mutual respect. Instead, they had a "sharp disagreement."

Paul uses the verb form of the Greek noun translated "sharp disagreement" in the great love chapter, where he states that love "is not provoked" (1 Cor. 13:5; see also Acts 17:16). At the very least, Paul and Barnabas were very provoked with one another. I think that we're not going too far to say that both men crossed the line into sinful anger. Neither man was following Paul's later directive, to put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience toward one another (Col. 3:12). It may have been God's will for the two men to separate, but it was not His will for them to separate through a heated quarrel.

Two practical observations here:

- 1) A person's greatest strengths are often the area for his greatest weaknesses.

Paul's strength was his resolute commitment to follow Christ no matter what the cost, and to stand firm in his convictions. He even publicly confronted a powerful man like Peter. You could beat Paul, throw him in prison, stone him, or whatever, but you couldn't stop him from proclaiming Jesus Christ and Him crucified as the only way of salvation. Paul's weakness was his inability to accept and work with a weaker man, like Mark, who had potential,

but just wasn't there yet. Paul's later comments regarding Mark, as well as other Scriptures that he wrote (*e.g.*, Rom. 15:1, 7) show that he overcame this weakness.

Barnabas' greatest strength was his ability to encourage the fainthearted and help the weak. He was the champion of the outsider and fringe person. He knew how to show grace to those who had failed. But he erred on the side of showing grace to those who needed to be confronted. As Paul mentions in Galatians 2:13, even Barnabas was carried away with the hypocrisy of Peter and the other Jews who withdrew from eating with the Gentile Christians out of fear of offending the Judaizers.

So the lesson is, know yourself. Where, by God's grace, are you strong and gifted? Exercise that strength for His glory. But also, be careful, because your strength may lead you into sin if you are not on guard. A man who is strong in discernment can easily become judgmental. A man who is strong in accepting others can easily err by tolerating serious sin or doctrinal error.

- 2) Since God always uses imperfect instruments in His service, we should not put too much trust in men, but in God, who alone is perfect.

You cannot find two more godly, dedicated servants of Jesus Christ than Paul and Barnabas, and yet here they are, clashing with one another. Noah was the most righteous man on earth, and yet after God's deliverance through the flood, he got drunk and shamefully exposed himself to his son. Job was the most righteous man in his day, and yet he wrongly contended with God for afflicting him. David was a man after God's heart, and yet he fell into terrible sin. As Solomon lamented, there is no man who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46). While there is a proper place for trust in the leaders that God puts over us, there is an improper trust that elevates them too high. If we are trusting in men rather than in the Lord Himself, we will be shaken when those men let us down.

Also, the fact that God uses imperfect men and women in His service should encourage all of us to get involved in serving Him. As long as we are not tolerating known sin in our lives, He can and will use us in His purpose in spite of our imperfections.

3. Christian unity does not mean that we all must work closely with one another, but rather is a matter of shared life and shared light.

There is a lot of muddled thinking about Christian unity. Some try for organizational union, but if you have any knowledge of the World or National Councils of Churches, you know that organizational union means nothing. Others try to get all the churches together for a unity worship service. They argue, "They will know that we are Christians by our love, not by our doctrinal agreement." But they ignore that Jesus also said in the same context, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17). There can be no true unity with those who deny the core truths of God's Word.

Unity does not mean that we all have to work closely with one another. While we need to be careful not to go our separate ways too quickly, without working through differences, there are times when two strong leaders need to recognize that God is calling them to different spheres of service. Any parting of ways should be done in a spirit of mutual respect and without bitterness or acrimony. While I wish that there was some word here about Paul and Barnabas patching things up before they parted ways, at least later Paul did speak in a supportive way of both Barnabas and Mark (1 Cor. 9:6; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Unity does not mean that we all have to agree on every doctrinal or practical matter. As I mentioned several weeks ago, there are a few core doctrines that every Christian must hold to or he is denying the faith. But there are many issues where godly Christians, committed to the Scriptures, disagree. We must be charitable toward one another on these matters. And, there are many differences over the methods we use to do the Lord's work. We should seek to follow biblical methods. We aren't free to do things without biblical warrant. Some methods are so unbiblical that they deserve criticism. But as with doctrine, godly men disagree over which methods are biblical. We must be charitable toward those whose methods we do not agree with, even though we could not work closely with them.

The Bible recognizes two kinds of unity. In Ephesians 4:3, Paul mentions the unity of the Spirit, which he says we must be

diligent to preserve. This implies that it is a spiritual fact, based on shared *life* in Jesus Christ. If a person has been born again into the body of Christ, then we are members of one another, and we must be careful not to damage that unity. Then, in verse 13, he mentions the unity of the faith, which he says we are to attain to as we mature in Christ. This is the oneness of shared *light* regarding biblical truth. It is the fellowship that deepens as we mutually grow to understand and love the great doctrines of the faith.

I might add that we need the Lord's wisdom in picking compatible teammates in ministry. Paul was wise to choose Silas, a man endorsed by the Jerusalem church, who could back up Paul in delivering the decisions of the Council to the various churches. Silas was a Roman citizen, as Paul was, which was to their advantage in ministering in cities under Roman jurisdiction (Acts 16:37 ff.). He was a gifted prophet who could boldly proclaim God's truth in a way that encouraged and strengthened believers (15:32). While no two men see eye to eye on everything, there should be a basic compatibility in approach to ministry.

We've seen that spiritual maturity does not erase personality differences. Such differences can lead to clashes that cause us to sin, if we're not careful. Christian unity does not require that we all work closely, but rather shared life and shared light in the Lord.

4. We should not let personality clashes cause us to quit serving the Lord.

The work of Christ is greater than any one of us, and we should keep on serving Him even if we've had a clash with another Christian. Neither Paul nor Barnabas let this clash stop them from serving the Lord. They didn't even take a time out. Instead of one missionary team, now in the providence of God, there were two.

Also, we do *not* read, "Paul was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, telling all the churches how wrong Barnabas was." Rather, he went around strengthening the churches (15:41). There is no indication that Paul and Barnabas became rivals or competed with each other after this. Both men were committed to know Christ in a deeper way and to proclaim Christ to every person. As I said, every time after this that Paul mentions Barnabas or Mark, he does so in a kind and supportive manner.

Sometimes it is necessary to warn other Christians about someone who is unethical or whose doctrine is off base. Paul did that on occasion. But our main emphasis needs to be on proclaiming Christ, not on hauling out our complaints against others to vindicate ourselves and to run down the other person.

Conclusion

When you face a personality clash with another Christian, as you surely will, try to disengage your emotions and objectively think through the answers to these four questions:

1) What is the real nature of the difficulty?

This is not an easy question to answer, but you must face it as honestly as possible. We all need to be careful here, because we have a built in tendency to push personality differences into the realm of doctrine or sin. It sounds far more spiritual to say that the other person is doctrinally off base or that he sinned against me than to admit that his personality grates on mine. It is especially difficult because our feelings usually get hurt in these situations. Sometimes a more objective third party can help us work through these matters (Phil. 4:2-3).

2) Is there an important biblical principle at stake?

Again, be careful here! Is there more than one principle that applies? I can hear Paul quoting Jesus: "No one after putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." And, Barnabas probably countered, "Yes, but God is the gracious God of the second chance. Look at Jonah. Look at Peter. Mark deserves a second chance." Both men had Scripture to back up their opposing views! Sometimes, because of personality differences, one man elevates one biblical principle, while the other man elevates a different biblical principle. Sometimes in such cases, if the principle is basic to one's approach to ministry, it may be better to agree to work separately.

Some of you may be thinking, "What if you can't separate from the person that you clash with because you're married to him (or her)?" That leads to the third question you need to ask:

3) What godly character qualities is the Lord trying to develop in me through this clash?

Sometimes God in His grace (and in His sense of humor) throws us together with people who grate against us in order to sandpaper our rough edges. Let's face it, I don't need patience, forbearance, gentleness, and kindness when the other person sees everything my way! I don't need to learn to deny myself when the other person thinks that I'm a wonderful guy. But when there is a clash, God often confronts me with my selfishness and stubbornness. If I submit to Him and don't bail out of the difficult relationship, He will use it to develop those Christlike qualities in me.

- 4) Would the cause of Christ be furthered or hindered by my continuing to work closely with this person?

In the case of two Christians who are married to one another, it would *not* further the cause of Christ to divorce over incompatible personalities. They need to learn to appreciate one another's strengths, to affirm each other in love, and to agree to disagree over certain matters of daily life. Divorce harms the work of Christ.

In the case of Christian workers, if they can learn to affirm one another's strengths, the beauty of the body of Christ can be demonstrated through their working relationship. God gives us differing gifts, and the hand has no right to reject the foot because it is not a hand (1 Cor. 12:12-30). But, there are times where two workers have to spend so much time ironing out matters between them that it hinders their getting on with the work of the ministry. At such times, it is probably better to seek different spheres of service in a spirit of mutual respect and affirmation.

The British admiral, Lord Nelson, once came on deck and found two of his officers quarreling. He whirled them around, pointed to the enemy ships, and exclaimed, "Gentlemen, *there* are your enemies!"

When we face personality differences in the church, we need to be diligent to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We need to seek to work out our differences if possible in a spirit of love and kindness. If we must part ways, we should continue serving the Lord and not let the enemy get us to attack those whom God has given different personalities than He has given us.

Discussion Questions

1. When is it a sin to belong to a particular denomination? Are denominations by definition sinful? Defend biblically.
2. How does liking someone interface with loving him (or her)? Is it wrong not to like everyone?
3. When my personality clashes with someone else's, how do I know when I cross the line into sin?
4. How can we work at genuine Christian unity with other believers? What practical steps can we take?

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