



Summary

What happens when two deeply committed believers disagree so sharply that they must part ways? Acts 15:36-41 places us right in the middle of one of the most honest and human moments in all of Scripture. Paul and Barnabas, two men who had labored side by side through hardship and triumph, find themselves at an impasse over John Mark, a young man who had abandoned their first missionary journey. Rather than glossing over this tension, the text preserves it in full, and in doing so it teaches us something profound about how God works through our differences. The central insight here is not about who was right and who was wrong, but about how God sovereignly uses men and women with distinct spiritual gifts and callings, even when those differences create friction. Barnabas, whose very name means son of encouragement, could not abandon someone in whom he saw unrealized potential. Paul, burning with urgency to confirm the doctrine of grace among the churches before legalism could take root, could not afford to risk the mission on someone who had already walked away once. Both men were being true to exactly who God made them to be. The result? Two missionary teams instead of one, and a reach that doubled. We are reminded that in the body of Christ, the diversity of gifts is not a liability. It is the design.





Points

Title: Faithful to the Calling: Grace, Gifts, and the Parting of Paul and Barnabas

Sermon Summary: Drawing from Acts 15:36-41, this sermon explores the doctrinal and relational tensions that shaped the early church's mission. The pastor establishes the critical importance of the Jerusalem Council's declaration that salvation comes by grace through faith in Christ alone, and explains why Paul was so urgently motivated to return to the planted churches before the Judaizing influence could undermine that doctrine. The sermon then examines the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark, framing it not as a moral failure by either man but as a natural expression of their distinct spiritual gifts. Barnabas, the consummate encourager and mentor, prioritized the missionary; Paul, the driven apostle, prioritized the mission. Both men remained true to their God-given callings, and God used their separation to multiply the work of the gospel. The sermon concludes with a call to personal salvation and an encouragement for every believer to identify and faithfully steward the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has provided them for the edification of the body of Christ.

Key Points:

- - The Jerusalem Council's declaration that salvation is by grace through faith alone, as led by the Holy Spirit, remains settled and authoritative regardless of majority opinion in the broader church world
- - The unbiblical doctrines of purgatory and works-based salvation rob believers of the eternal security God desires for them, as affirmed in 1 John 5:13
- - Paul's urgency to revisit the planted churches was driven by the doctrinal crisis of the moment, specifically the need to deliver the Jerusalem Council's letter confirming grace before Judaizing teachers could spread their doctrine of works
- - The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was not a matter of one man being right and the other wrong, but of two men with different spiritual gifts remaining faithful to their distinct callings
- - Barnabas prioritized the missionary over the mission, while Paul prioritized the mission over the missionary, and God used both perspectives to advance the gospel
- - John Mark, the subject of the dispute, was ultimately restored to ministry and became useful even to Paul, and is credited as the author of the Gospel of Mark
- - Every born again believer has been given at least one spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit, and stewarding that gift faithfully within the body of Christ is a measure of a life well lived
- - Attempting to serve outside one's spiritual gifting leads to striving and burnout, while serving within one's calling is empowered and sustained by the Holy Spirit

Scripture Reference:

- - Acts 15:36-41 (primary passage)
- - Acts 15:24-28 (the Jerusalem Council's letter and its declaration)
- - Acts 9:26-30 (Barnabas introducing Saul to the apostles in Jerusalem)
- - Acts 11:19-26 (Barnabas seeking out Saul in Tarsus and bringing him to Antioch)
- - Acts 13:13 (John Mark departing from Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia)
- - 1 John 5:13 (assurance of eternal life for those who believe)



- - 1 Corinthians 12:7-20 (the diversity of spiritual gifts within the one body of Christ)
- - Romans 12:4-8 (different gifts according to the grace given to each believer)
- - 1 Peter 4:10 (stewarding spiritual gifts as good stewards of God's grace)
- - Colossians 4:10 (Paul commending Mark to the church at Colossae)
- - 2 Timothy 4:9-11 (Paul requesting Mark because he is useful for ministry)

Stories:

- - The pastor shares his personal testimony of growing up in the church without ever hearing the gospel of grace or the call to be born again, and experiencing a transformative conversion at age 38 when he finally understood salvation by faith alone
- - The account of Barnabas introducing Saul of Tarsus to the apostles in Jerusalem, vouching for his conversion when the entire church was afraid of him, illustrating Barnabas's gift of seeing potential in others
- - The account of Barnabas traveling to Tarsus ten years after Saul's conversion to find him and bring him to Antioch, where together they taught the church for a year and disciples were first called Christians
- - The historical background of the doctrine of purgatory, tracing its development through the Jewish prayer of Kaddish, the Council of Lyon in 1274, the Council of Florence in 1449, and the Council of Trent in 1563, and its connection to the same works-based thinking that troubled the church at Antioch
- - The account of St. Peter's Basilica being largely funded by the sale of indulgences, offered as a historical consequence of denying the doctrine of salvation by grace alone
- - The pastor's personal reflection on being mentored by a brother in Christ who saw ministry potential in him before he saw it in himself, leading eventually to his role as a pastor



Scripture

EXPLICITLY CITED

- Acts 15:35 - Paul and Barnabas remaining in Antioch teaching and preaching
- Acts 15:24-26 - The Jerusalem Council's letter addressing the Judaizers
- Acts 15:28 - "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"
- Acts 15:36 - Paul's proposal to revisit the churches
- Acts 15:37-39 - The dispute between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark
- Acts 13:13 - John Mark departing from Paul and Barnabas at Pamphylia
- Acts 4:36 - The introduction of Barnabas as "son of encouragement"
- Acts 9:26-30 - Barnabas vouching for Saul of Tarsus before the apostles
- Acts 11:19-26 - The founding of the Antioch church and Barnabas retrieving Saul from Tarsus
- 1 John 5:13 - Assurance of eternal life for believers
- 1 Corinthians 12:7-20 - Spiritual gifts and the diversity of the body of Christ
- Romans 12:4-8 - Different gifts according to grace
- 1 Peter 4:10 - Stewarding spiritual gifts for one another
- Colossians 4:10 - Paul's greeting mentioning Mark, nephew of Barnabas
- 2 Timothy 4:9-11 - Paul requesting Mark because he is useful for ministry

ALLUDED TO

- Acts 15:1 - Judaizers insisting on circumcision for salvation
- Acts 15:23 - The Jerusalem Council's letter addressed to Gentile believers
- John 3:16 - God's love for the world and the offer of eternal life (quoted in the closing prayer)
- 2 Corinthians 11 - Paul's contention with Judaizers in the churches he founded



Quotes

To Barnabas, the missionary was more important than the mission. And to Paul, the mission was more important than the missionary.

You mean I can have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? It's not based on what I do or what I've done? That was amazing to me that he's done the work for me and I just appreciate that doctrine so much.

You'll never know that you've done enough and it'll be a constant bombardment in your mind that you haven't. And this is what causes people to lie awake at night wondering about their eternal destiny because they're not eternally secure.

It is incredibly likely that without Barnabas, Paul would have remained in obscurity.

Those who seek to evangelize the saved are often a difficult bunch to work with.

It was the Holy Spirit that brought about this separation by each man remaining faithful to their character and their nature as led by the Holy Spirit.

Where God guides, God provides. And you don't have to worry, you don't get burned out because you're not striving to please God. You're in the course, you're in the stream of the Holy Spirit and things come easy to you in ministry.

The plain biblical fact is the work of salvation was finished by Jesus on the cross, and for anyone to pontificate about the additional requirement of good works and the keeping of sacraments for salvation is to undermine man's eternal security.

Everyone needs a mentor like Barnabas. They are invaluable in the body of Christ.

Success in this life, the life that we're presently living, can be measured in two ways. And the first one of those ways is by being born again. Secondly, being true to the gift or the gifts, spiritual gift or spiritual gifts, the indwelling Holy Spirit has provided you.





Discussion Questions

The Jerusalem Council declared that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, yet the sermon notes that the majority position in the church world today still adds works or sacraments to salvation -- how do you personally guard your own understanding of grace against the subtle drift toward earning your standing before God?

The sermon draws a direct line from the Judaizers who troubled the church at Antioch to later doctrines like purgatory, suggesting that a lack of certainty about salvation produces these kinds of theological additions -- in what ways might an insecure faith in your own life lead you to add conditions to what God has already declared finished?

Barnabas saw potential in Saul of Tarsus when the entire Jerusalem church was afraid of him, and he remembered Saul for ten years before seeking him out in Tarsus -- who in your life might God be calling you to pursue with that same patient, long-sighted encouragement?

The sermon presents a compelling contrast between Barnabas, for whom the missionary was more important than the mission, and Paul, for whom the mission was more important than the missionary -- which of these perspectives do you find yourself naturally gravitating toward, and what might that reveal about your spiritual gifts and calling?

Paul's sharp contention with Barnabas over John Mark ultimately resulted in two missionary teams instead of one, and John Mark went on to write a Gospel and become useful to Paul himself -- how does this outcome challenge the way you typically view conflict or disagreement within the body of Christ?

The sermon describes the danger of expecting everyone in the church to share the same intensity about a particular ministry calling, yet also emphasizes that every believer is responsible to steward their spiritual gifts -- how do you strike a healthy balance between championing your own calling and honoring the different callings of those around you?

The pastor describes being in the flow of the Holy Spirit as something that makes ministry feel natural and sustainable rather than exhausting, and contrasts this with striving in a role that does not fit -- how do you discern whether the ministry work you are doing flows from your Spirit-given gifts or from a sense of obligation or guilt?

John Mark abandoned the mission in Pamphylia as a young man, yet was later restored to ministry and became the author of a Gospel -- what does his story suggest about how the church should respond to those who have failed, quit, or walked away from ministry responsibilities?

The sermon points out that during the events of Acts 15, the New Testament did not yet exist, making the letter from the Jerusalem Council the only written doctrinal authority available to the churches -- how does reflecting on that historical moment deepen your appreciation for and responsibility toward the completed Scriptures you now hold?

The pastor describes his own experience of spending decades in church without ever hearing about being born again or having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ -- what does this account stir in you regarding your own responsibility to clearly and consistently communicate the gospel to those in your sphere of influence?



Small Group Guide

Acts 15:36-41 -- The Gifts That Drive Us

INTRODUCTION FOR GROUP LEADERS

This passage captures a moment of sharp disagreement between two faithful men of God -- Paul and Barnabas -- over whether John Mark should accompany them on a return visit to the churches they had planted. Rather than declaring one man right and the other wrong, this study invites group members to explore how different spiritual gifts, personalities, and callings can all serve God's purposes, even when they lead to conflict and separation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *The Jerusalem Council's declaration that salvation comes by grace through faith alone -- not by works or the keeping of sacraments -- was a foundational moment in church history, and its implications are still contested today.*
 - *God uses people with different gifts and temperaments to accomplish his purposes. Barnabas was a mentor and encourager; Paul was a mission-driven apostle. Both were necessary. Neither was wrong.*
 - *To Barnabas, the missionary was more important than the mission. To Paul, the mission was more important than the missionary. Both perspectives reflect genuine spiritual callings.*
 - *Every believer has been given at least one spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit, and that gift is meant to be used for the edification of the body of Christ, not suppressed or forced into a role it was never meant to fill.*
 - *Success in the Christian life can be measured in two ways: first, by placing your faith in Christ alone for salvation; and second, by being faithful to the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has given you.*
 - *Barnabas' investment in John Mark was ultimately vindicated. Mark went on to write the Gospel of Mark and was later described by Paul himself as useful for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).*
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening -- Getting to Know Each Other

1. *Think of a mentor who has had a significant impact on your life -- whether in faith, work, or a personal area. What made that person's influence so meaningful to you?*



2. *Have you ever been in a situation where two people you respected deeply disagreed with each other, and both seemed to have valid points? What was that like to navigate?*
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Digging into the Text -- Acts 15:36-41

3. *The sermon described the urgency behind Paul and Barnabas' planned return visit to the churches they had planted. It was not simply a friendly check-in -- there was a doctrinal reason for the trip. Why was it so important for the message of grace to reach those churches quickly, and what does that tell us about the stakes involved in sound doctrine?*
 4. *Paul's concern was that John Mark had quit on them in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13). The text says Paul "insisted" they should not take him. What do you think Paul's reasoning reveals about his understanding of the mission they were on? Do you find his position understandable?*
 5. *Barnabas was so committed to restoring John Mark that he was willing to part ways with Paul over it. What does this tell us about Barnabas' view of people and ministry? Can you think of a time when someone's belief in you changed the trajectory of your life?*
 6. *The pastor made the observation that "to Barnabas, the mission was secondary to the missionary" and "to Paul, the missionary was secondary to the mission." Do you think one of these perspectives is more spiritually mature than the other, or are both necessary in the body of Christ? Why?*
 7. *The passage says the contention between Paul and Barnabas "became so sharp that they parted from one another." How do you reconcile the fact that two Spirit-filled men could have such a serious falling out? What does this tell us about the humanity of the people God uses?*
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Exploring the Broader Themes

8. *The sermon emphasized the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, contrasting it with systems that add works or sacraments to the requirements for salvation. The pastor referenced 1 John 5:13, where John writes so that believers may know they have eternal life. How confident are you personally in your own eternal security? What has shaped that confidence -- or lack of it?*
9. *The pastor described how the unbiblical doctrine of purgatory developed historically, tracing it in part to the same kind of works-based thinking that troubled the church at Antioch. Why do you think it is so difficult for people to accept that salvation is entirely the work of God and not something they must earn or maintain?*
10. *In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Paul describes the diversity of spiritual gifts within the body of Christ. The pastor said you should not expect everyone to be equally excited about the ministry calling God has given you. Have you ever struggled with this -- either expecting others to share your passion or feeling pressure to match someone else's enthusiasm for a ministry that is not your calling?*



11. The pastor described the experience of being in the "flow" of the Holy Spirit in ministry -- where serving feels natural and energizing rather than draining. Have you experienced that in any area of your life or ministry? What does it feel like when you are serving from your gifts versus when you are striving in your own strength?

Reflecting on John Mark

12. John Mark quit, was written off by Paul, championed by Barnabas, and ultimately restored to the point where Paul called him "useful for ministry" and where he authored the Gospel of Mark. What does his story say about second chances, patient mentorship, and the long arc of God's work in a person's life?
13. Is there someone in your life -- perhaps in your church, your family, or your circle of friends -- who has "quit" on something and in whom you still see potential? What would it look like to be a Barnabas to that person?
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PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This Week, Consider the Following:

- **Identify your gifts.** If you are unsure what spiritual gifts God has given you, ask a trusted brother or sister in Christ what they observe in you. Sometimes others see in us what we have not yet seen in ourselves -- just as Barnabas saw in both Paul and John Mark.
 - **Serve from your gifts, not from guilt.** If you find yourself involved in a ministry area that consistently drains you and produces no fruit, prayerfully consider whether you are serving from a genuine calling or from a sense of obligation. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you toward the area where you are truly equipped.
 - **Be a Barnabas to someone.** Think of one person in your life who needs encouragement, a second chance, or someone to believe in them. Reach out to them this week with a specific word of affirmation or an invitation to get involved in something meaningful.
 - **Examine your view of salvation.** Spend time this week in 1 John 5:9-13 and reflect honestly on whether you are resting in the finished work of Christ or quietly trying to supplement it with your own efforts. If you find yourself uncertain about your eternal security, bring that to God in honest prayer and discuss it with your group leader or pastor.
 - **Pray for those who have left.** Just as Barnabas did not give up on John Mark, commit to praying this week for someone who has walked away from the church, from ministry, or from their faith. Ask God to raise up a Barnabas in their life.
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CLOSING THOUGHT FOR THE GROUP

The separation of Paul and Barnabas was not a failure. It was the multiplication of the mission. One team became two. The gospel moved in more directions at once. God was not surprised by the conflict, and he was not undone by it. He worked through the gifts and convictions of both men to accomplish more than either could have done alone. The same is true in your church, your small group, and your own life. The gifts you have been given are not accidental. They are intentional. Use them well, and trust God to knit together what he has designed.

CLOSING PRAYER POINTS

- *Gratitude for the grace of God that saves apart from works*
- *Wisdom to identify and serve faithfully within your spiritual gifts*
- *A spirit of encouragement toward those who need a Barnabas in their lives*
- *Courage to share the gospel of grace with those who have not yet believed*
- *Humility to remain in the flow of the Holy Spirit rather than striving in your own strength*



Daily Devotional

5-Day Bible Reading Plan and Devotional Guide

Theme: Grace, Calling, and the Life of Faith

Day 1: Salvation by Grace Alone

Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10; 1 John 5:13

Devotional:

The Jerusalem Council settled it once and for all: salvation comes by faith in Christ alone, not by works or the keeping of religious observance. Yet many still live without certainty of their eternal destination, measuring their standing before God on a scale of good deeds versus bad. This is an exhausting and ultimately hopeless way to live. God does not desire that his children lie awake in fear and doubt. He desires that you know, with settled confidence, that you belong to him. That word know is not accidental. It is a gift. Rest in it today.

Personal Reflection: Have you fully accepted that your salvation rests entirely on what Christ has done, not on what you have done or must still do? What doubts, if any, remain, and what does Scripture say directly to those doubts?

Practical Application: Write down three truths from Scripture that confirm your standing before God. Return to them whenever doubt arises throughout your week.

Day 2: The Courage to Carry the Gospel Forward

Reading: Acts 15:36-41; Romans 1:16

Devotional:

Paul understood that the message of grace was fragile in the sense that it could be crowded out by competing voices insisting on additional requirements for salvation. His urgency to return to the churches he had planted was not born of restlessness but of deep conviction. The gospel is not a message that can afford to wait. Every generation faces the same challenge Paul faced: will the pure message of grace reach people before it is diluted by the additions of human religious tradition? The same Holy Spirit who compelled Paul compels us. The mission belongs to all who have received the grace of God.

Personal Reflection: In what ways might you be delaying your participation in sharing the gospel? What would it look like to carry it forward with the same urgency Paul demonstrated?



Practical Application: Identify one person in your life who has not yet heard the gospel clearly presented. Pray for them by name this week and ask God to open a door for a meaningful conversation.

Day 3: The Gift of the Encourager

Reading: Acts 4:36-37; Acts 9:26-28; Acts 11:22-26

Devotional:

Barnabas did not simply encourage people with kind words. He took risks on behalf of people others had already written off. When Saul of Tarsus, former persecutor of the church, arrived in Jerusalem hoping to join the disciples, it was Barnabas alone who stepped forward and vouched for him. Ten years later, when Saul had been sent away to Tarsus and largely forgotten, it was Barnabas who remembered him and went to find him. That kind of faithfulness to another person's potential is rare and enormously costly. It requires believing in someone more than they currently believe in themselves. The body of Christ desperately needs people like that.

Personal Reflection: Is there someone in your life, perhaps someone who has stumbled or been overlooked, in whom you can see potential that they cannot yet see in themselves? What is holding you back from pursuing them the way Barnabas pursued Saul?

Practical Application: Reach out this week to someone you have not spoken to in a long time, someone who once showed gifts for ministry or service and may have drifted. Simply let them know you remember them and that you see what God placed in them.

Day 4: Faithful to Your Calling

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:4-20; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Peter 4:10

Devotional:

Paul and Barnabas were both right. That is the profound and often overlooked truth of their sharp disagreement. Each man was being faithful to the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit had placed within him. Barnabas was wired to restore and raise up. Paul was wired to press forward on mission. Neither gift is more important than the other. The body of Christ requires both. When you serve in alignment with the gifts God has given you, ministry does not feel like striving. It feels like stepping onto one of those flat moving walkways in an airport and discovering that every stride covers far more ground than it should. That is the Holy Spirit at work through a willing and rightly positioned vessel.

Personal Reflection: Are you currently serving in a way that aligns with how God has genuinely gifted you, or are you serving out of obligation or the expectations of others? How would you describe the difference in how those two experiences feel?



Practical Application: Take time this week to honestly assess your spiritual gifts. Speak with a trusted brother or sister in Christ about what they observe in you. Then ask God to show you where those gifts are most needed in your church community right now.

Day 5: Restoration and Redemption in the Life of the Believer

Reading: 2 Timothy 4:9-11; Colossians 4:10; Mark 1:1

Devotional:

John Mark quit. He walked away from the mission at a critical moment and returned home. Paul did not forget it, and the disagreement it caused between two great men of God was sharp enough to separate them permanently. And yet the story does not end there. By the time Paul writes his final letter from a Roman prison, he asks specifically for Mark, saying he is useful to him for ministry. The young man who once quit went on to write one of the four Gospels and to serve alongside the Apostle Peter. No failure in the life of a believer is the final word. God is always in the business of restoration. The question is whether you will remain available to be restored.

Personal Reflection: Is there an area of your life or a past failure in ministry where you have believed the lie that you are no longer useful to God? What would it mean to allow God to write the next chapter of that story?

Practical Application: Confess any area of past failure or retreat to God in prayer today. Then take one concrete step back toward the ministry or the community you stepped away from, trusting that God's purposes for you have not expired.

