

## ***Virtues of Healthy Churches***

*Acts 15:36-16:5*

If you read the Bible cover to cover you will find that it does not give a sanitized view of our relationship with God. Rather, the Bible is very transparent and honest about the complexities and challenges of walking with Christ and living in community with other followers of Christ.

This is one of many reasons why the Scriptures are so fascinating and so relevant to everyday life. Today's passage, for example, is comprised of two accounts that raise a couple of issues that we might have expected would be swept under the rug. Acts 15:36-16:5 features an unresolved conflict among committed followers of Christ as well as a seeming contradiction. Instead of **ignoring** these two situations, Luke **highlights** them and shows how God was at work in the midst of these situations. Churches became stronger and more fruitful. Why? Because those involved embodied a couple of foundational virtues.

Therefore, this passage illustrates two foundational virtues that we need to embody if we are going to be a strong, healthy church. These obviously aren't the only virtues we need, but they are foundational. Without these two virtues, we will not be as healthy and fruitful as God wants us to be.

The first virtue we need is resilience.

***Resilience: staying loyal to Jesus in spite of strife.*** (Acts 15:36-41) By resilience, I mean spiritual toughness. If you're resilient, you don't give up and drop out of the race when things get hard; you remain loyal to Jesus even when people disagree with you and disappoint you. In this paragraph we see resilience in both Paul and Barnabas.

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."

Paul and Barnabas were "spiritual fathers" to the churches they had planted on their first missionary journey. Like good fathers, they cared about them. So Paul wanted to return and visit the believers in each city to see how they were doing.

37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

Luke had mentioned back in 13:13 that when they were in Pamphylia that "John left them and returned to Jerusalem." Luke doesn't tell us **why** John Mark had left and returned. Whatever the issue, Barnabas wanted to take him on this trip to revisit the churches. But Paul disagreed; he "thought it best not to take him" or "did not count him worthy" to take with them. Since John Mark had withdrawn from them on the last trip, Paul didn't consider him worthy to go on this trip. As we'll also see in the next paragraph, Paul was concerned primarily about effectiveness.

Barnabas didn't defer to Paul on this issue. Even though they were both very spiritually mature, they couldn't agree.

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.

We know from Colossians 4:10 that Mark was Barnabas' cousin. So perhaps there was some family loyalty. We know from earlier in Acts that Barnabas had a gift of being skillful in befriending and including people who were on the margins (people like Paul - see Acts 9). So he took John Mark and sailed to Cyprus where they had led people to Christ. In spite of his disagreement with and separation from Paul, Barnabas remained loyal to Jesus and his calling to strengthen the churches in Cyprus.

But Paul chose Silas to accompany him to visit the churches in Asia Minor described in chapters 13 and 14. The result is given in verse 41:

41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

In spite of his disagreement with and separation from Barnabas, Paul remained loyal to Jesus and his calling to strengthen the churches in Syria and Cilicia. In other words, Paul and Barnabas were both **spiritually resilient**. They stayed on mission in spite of the fact that they had such a sharp disagreement that they couldn't even be on the same team together.

The fact that this rift between Paul and Barnabas is even included in the book of Acts suggests at least a couple things for us. First, **sharp disagreements and separations among committed believers are a reality in the body of Christ**. Sometimes these believers remain part of the same church and separate relationally; they don't have close fellowship with each other. The larger the church, the more common this is. Other times, the disagreement is so significant or intense that people feel the need to leave a church altogether. Over the 36-year history of this church, hundreds of good, godly people have felt the need to leave Faith. And hundreds of good, godly people have left other churches and become part of Faith. What happened between Paul and Barnabas still happens today.

Of course, the New Testament pleads with us to be diligent to preserve the unity that we have in Christ (see Ephesians 4:1-6, Philippians 1:27-30, etc.). The New Testament pleads with us to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5) and to avoid deeds of the flesh that are destructive to relationships - pride, outbursts of anger, being quarrelsome (loving a good fight), etc. The New Testament urges us to be the type of people who don't have unnecessary conflicts and to be the type of people who work hard at resolving conflicts that do arise. So don't hear me saying that it's no big deal when we have such sharp disagreements that relationships are compromised. No, we should follow Paul's advice in Romans 12:18 which says:

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

When possible, as far as it depends on us, we live peaceably with one another. But Paul and Barnabas illustrate that it's not always possible. . . and it doesn't only depend only on you. . . therefore you can't always live peaceably with all. Sharp disagreements and separations among committed believers are a reality in the body of Christ.

But secondly, today's passage also suggests that when such separations occur, **we should be resilient**; we should be spiritually tough enough to **stay loyal to Jesus** anyway. Paul and Barnabas were resilient; they each remained loyal to Jesus. They didn't become embittered and disillusioned and give up. They each stayed on mission and continued strengthening the churches that they had established.

How resilient are you in light of disagreements and separations you've had with other believers? Have you ever felt like giving up because of conflicts in the church? I have. My darkest days as a pastor and a disciple were because of unresolved conflicts I've had with other committed followers of Christ. I never felt like walking away from Christ, but I've felt like walking away from the church a few times. But God has always brought back to a place of glad submission to him and to the assignment he's given me as a pastor. God has used Scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 4 ("it's a small thing if you judge me. . . I don't even judge myself. . . I have a clean conscience, but that doesn't mean I'm innocent. . . God will judge us both. . ."). And God has used many of you in my life to help me have the mind of Christ on conflicts in the church. By God's grace I no longer feel the need to do yet another autopsy on a relationship that could not be saved or a situation that could not be resolved.

The health of this church (and of the body of Christ) requires resilience, spiritual toughness, when it comes to disagreements and separations with other believers. Our loyalty to Jesus needs to be deeper than our disappointment with other believers. He died for us, therefore how can we not live for him?

The second virtue is no easier than the first.

**Selflessness: sacrificing freedoms for the sake of the gospel.** (Acts 16:1-5)

Selflessness means that we not only think about ourselves; we also think about others. We don't merely think about what we **have** to do; we also think about what we **can** do to help others know God. These verses describe how Paul and Silas returned to the churches that had been established in Asia Minor. In verse 1 we are introduced to a young man named Timothy.

1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek.

Timothy had become a disciple of Jesus when Paul had previously visited. Notice how Luke describes Timothy's parents: His mother was a Jewish woman who had also believed in Jesus, but his father was a Greek (a Gentile, non-Jewish). We learn in verse 2 that Timothy had a good reputation among the Christians in that region.

2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.

Because of his reputation, we read (verse 3) that Paul wanted Timothy to be part of the team that would travel to existing churches and would establish additional churches everywhere they went. This young man would become one of Paul's most-beloved coworkers and friends. Years later Paul would write to him the letters we know as 1 and 2 Timothy.

3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

If you were with us last week, the fact that Paul "took. . . and circumcised. . ." Timothy is somewhat shocking. Last week we saw that Paul and Barnabas had been leading Gentiles to Christ and welcomed them into the church. But some Jewish believers basically said that these Gentile had to be circumcised if they wanted to be saved. So Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to get a ruling from the apostles and elders of the church there. After discussion, they all agreed that all people everywhere (including Gentiles) are saved by grace alone, not by keeping the requirements of the law. Therefore, missionaries should not "lay the burden" of circumcision upon the Gentiles. Rather, they should urge Gentiles to abstain from a short list of practices and sins that were associated with idol worship and which were especially offensive to Jewish Christians. But they did not have to be circumcised to be saved.

So why would Paul "take Timothy and circumcise him"? It certainly had nothing to do with his salvation. Rather, Luke tells us, it was "because of the Jews who were in those places, for they knew that his father was a Greek." Paul didn't want Timothy to be a distraction or a barrier to the Jews in that region he was trying to reach. In that day they would have viewed Timothy as "technically an apostate Jew" (Peterson, p. 450) because he was the uncircumcised son of a Jewish mother. We don't know the circumstances, but it's possible that his Gentile father didn't allow Timothy to be circumcised as an infant. Whatever the case, the perception among Jews would have been that because Timothy didn't have the sign of the covenant, circumcision, he had abandoned the Jewish faith. We know from 2 Timothy 3:15 that that wasn't the case; he had known the Hebrew Scriptures from childhood. But that would have been the perception among the Jews in that region.

Paul didn't want the people he was trying to reach thinking about Timothy not being circumcised; he wanted them thinking about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah. And Timothy agreed. He could have said, "No, I don't HAVE to be circumcised, so I'm not going to be circumcised." But he didn't say that. He sacrificed his freedoms for the sake of the gospel.

Timothy's willingness to be circumcised reflected Paul's commitment expressed in 1 Corinthians 9.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. . . . 22 I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Without compromising his theology or his conscience, Paul voluntarily sacrificed his freedoms in order to remove barriers to the gospel. That's why he wanted Timothy to be circumcised.

This type of selflessness - where we voluntarily lay aside our freedoms for the sake of the gospel - is largely a foreign concept in the church today. That's because we tend to be very committed to our rights and freedoms and those without Christ tend to be an afterthought. To clarify, I'm not talking about other people demanding that you give up your freedoms (Paul would have none of that - see Galatians 2). I'm talking about voluntarily laying aside freedoms out of compassion for others.

Paul and Timothy's behavior was driven by compassion. Since they cared so much about the people who needed a relationship with God, they asked the question, "Will this behavior or issue help or hinder these people from hearing the gospel?" If it hindered the gospel - even if they had the freedom to do it - they laid it aside (at least sometimes).

The health of this church (and of the body of Christ) requires selflessness; at times we need to sacrifice our freedoms for the sake of the gospel.

In verse 4 Luke mentions the decision of the Jerusalem council which removed barriers to the gospel for Gentiles.

4 As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

Notice the result of their sensitivity toward both Jews and Gentiles:

5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

The result was stronger, more fruitful churches. That's didn't happen by accident; it happened because of selflessness on the part of Paul, Timothy, Silas, and others.

Maybe you're wondering, "What exactly does this type of selflessness look like for me? What specific freedoms do you think I need to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel?" Those are questions I cannot answer. There's not a one-size-fits-all answer to those questions. The answers will vary from person to person.

My recommendation is that we cultivate the same mind (the same way of thinking) as the missionaries we send to other cultures. They don't go and live in a bubble, isolated from people who need Christ. No, they are very intentional about entering into their new culture without compromising their theology or their consciences. They spend massive amounts of time studying the culture so that they don't say and do things that cause unnecessary barriers to the gospel. They invest time and energy to develop honest friendships with people who need Christ. They not only bring the words of the gospel; they bring their very lives to other people. And they pray. That's selflessness; they aren't only thinking about themselves but also others who need Christ.

Our conviction here at Faith is that we need to have the same commitments here that our missionaries have in other cultures. We need to have the same selflessness and the same willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. It's hypocritical to do anything else.

This week as you live your life - in your neighborhood, your workplace, wherever you spend time - invite God to show you ways that you can be more selfless for the sake of the gospel. . . and ways that you might sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. Be curious about other people. Look for ways to enter into honest friendships with people. Ask yourself (or people who know you well), "Is there anything I'm saying or doing (in person or online) that creates barriers between me and people who might need to know Christ?"

What I'm really urging us to do is to ***seek God about living selfless lives***. When we really seek God, the pressure is off. We don't have force or manufacture anything. We pay attention to God and follow his leading. The most joyful and satisfied people I know are those who are wholeheartedly seeking God and living selflessly for the sake of the gospel. So please know that this isn't a life of obligation and drudgery; it's a life of deep joy and satisfaction.

We must embody the virtues of resilience and selflessness if we are going to be a strong, healthy church.