

When Christians disagree

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[0:00] Passage in context, we've been through it over these last few weeks and now we're at the end.!

Have you ever disappointed someone? Have you ever taken sides with someone in an argument? Have you ever fallen out with someone?

I suspect for all of us, at least some of these we would say yes, perhaps all of these we would say yes to. In which case, this passage is for you. The passage is for me.

We are human beings. We are living in a sinful world. We're living in bodies that are sinful. This passage is for us.

Isn't it great that the Bible doesn't hide the realities of living together as sinners with one another? It doesn't hide that from us.

[1:26] And it shows us, particularly here in stark reality, what it's like to live alongside one another as sinful brothers and sisters.

This passage shows people who disagree with one another. People who once got on well with each other disagree. And we in this room will have disagreements with one another.

We'll have disagreements with one another about maybe political things. We'll have all voted differently during the election last year.

We'll all have different views on Donald Trump. Is he a good thing for America? Is he not a good thing? Or somewhere in between. We'll have different views with one another and that's okay. It's okay to disagree.

It's okay to agree to disagree. We'll have different views about how church life should happen.

Views about whether the songs we're singing are songs we should be singing or whether we should sing other songs instead.

[2:36] We'll have different views on that. Different views on the way we should sing them. Different views on what we should be preaching on. It's okay to agree to disagree with one another, isn't it?

But sometimes our disagreements may lead to us falling out with one another. And so what do we do then? What do we do when Christians don't get on?

What do we do when things feel awkward? Well, this passage is here for us to help us. So let's look at this passage and let's see how it helps us.

The two characters we have here are Paul and Barnabas. We've been following them over these last few chapters. Paul, we saw right at the start of his journey of faith in Christ in Acts chapter 9.

We saw his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus. And we discover that he was an apostle, unlike the others, but still an apostle, sent by the risen Lord Jesus to reach the Gentiles.

[3:58] And he undertook his ministry with the help of Barnabas. And they'd spend lots of time together, traveling with one another, preaching the gospel from place to place.

God had used them greatly for his glory and to build his kingdom. And then Barnabas, well, he features in Acts way before Paul, actually in chapter 4, where he sold a field for the gospel.

And he is known as a son of encouragement. He's the sort of person you would want welcoming you into church, encouraging you. It's good to see you. The sort of person you might gravitate towards after a church service is finished and try and have a coffee with him.

So that he encourages you as you seek to live for the Lord during the week. He's an encourager.

He even advocated for Paul back in chapter 9 when the believers were suspicious of Paul.

If you remember, Paul was a persecutor of God's people. He hated God's people. And so now he's had this miraculous conversion. People are suspicious.

[5:17] But look there, you might want to turn back there to chapter 9, verse 26. It says, It says, When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples.

That's Paul. But they were all afraid of him. Not believing that he was really a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.

He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him. And how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. Barnabas comes and he defends Paul.

He says, No, you can listen to him. God really has worked his grace in Paul's life. That's how encouraging Barnabas was.

He saw the best in people. But these two men, after they had spent much time together, after the events of this chapter, where we saw the threat to the gospel, threat to the unity of the church.

[6:25] We saw them standing up and saying, No, we believe in the grace of God. We don't believe the Gentile believers need to be circumcised in order to be believers.

They were defending the gospel together. But after all that they had been through, helping to keep the church united, helping to keep the peace between the Jewish and Gentile believers, after all this, what happens?

Verse 36. Sometime later, Paul said to Barnabas, Let's go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preach the word of God to see how they are doing.

Paul has this great idea. Let's go back. Let's go back and encourage the believers in Christ. And Barnabas says, Yeah, great idea.

Let's bring Mark with us. Verse 37. Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them. And surely, Paul would say, Yeah, sure, bring him along.

[7:38] The more help, the more the merrier. But verse 38, Paul did not think it wise to take him. Because he had deserted them in Panthylia.

And had not continued with them the work. He says, Actually, Barnabas, I'm not sure your idea is so good. I'm not sure we should take John Mark.

Don't you remember? He deserted us. Can we really trust him in the rigorousness of traveling to and fro and facing persecution?

Can we really trust him to be committed to the mission of God? We have seen John Mark mentioned in Acts.

Let's just go back to see where we see him. So chapter 12, verse 25. When Barnabas and Saul finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

[8:57] So Mark joined them. He was part of their mission. And then chapter 13, verse 5. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.

John was with them as their helper. John helped them. He was alongside them. Perhaps he carried their coats. Who knows what sort of help he gave.

But he was certainly their helper. Helped them in the practical things as they journeyed long ways, as they worked hard for the gospel. And then verse 13.

This is what Paul is concerned about. Chapter 13, verse 13. It says, From Paphos, Paul and his companions, Seotapura in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.

Now you read that and think, what's the issue? Well, as back in chapter 15, the issue that Paul has is there.

[10:03] In verse 38, he deserted us in Pamphylia. He didn't just leave us. He deserted us. He couldn't cope with the missionary journey anymore. And so in Paul's mind, there was this question mark over him.

Is he really the guy we want? Or will he desert us again? But Barnabas, in his encourager-like spirit, is probably thinking, Well, no, let's give him a second chance.

It's been about two years now. The guy's changed, and he's a committed follower of the Lord Jesus. By the way, he's my cousin.

We get that information in Colossians. But it's worth pointing out that the issue here is not a gospel issue.

He hasn't disqualified himself from the ministry in any way, from helping them. He hasn't failed through a major sin. Nor does there seem to be a doctrinal error he's fallen into.

[11:07] So, we have here this sort of fork in the road moment. Which way are they going to go? Are they going to take Barnabas together with them to encourage the other churches?

Or are they going to say no and part ways with each other? Or go together but without John, Mark? Which direction will they go in?

And I wonder which direction you would choose in this situation before we see what actually happens. Would you think along Paul's line of thinking?

You know, the task is too rigorous for John, Mark. We don't want to desert her. Or would you be thinking more along the way of Barnabas? Give him a second chance.

God's a God of grace. I think it would be dependent on our characters. I don't think there's a clear right and wrong here. I think some of us would side with Paul in this and some of us would side with Barnabas in this.

[12:18] And that's okay. But we see the sad result of this disagreement and it's there in verse 39. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left. Things get awkward. Between these two men who traveled many miles together, who faced persecution together, who had the joy of seeing many men, women, boys and girls converted to see the Lord Jesus as their Savior.

And now, after all that they've been through, there's this sad parting. And it's sad to say that this sort of disagreement between Christians and even Christian leaders is still a reality in our fallen worlds.

And so the question that we have this morning is what do we do when Christians fall out with one another? What do we do when Christians fall out with one another?

[13:40] Well, hopefully these next few points help us. Some from the passage and some from the rest of the Bible. When disagreements come, what do we do?

Firstly, don't take sides. Both Paul and Barnabas had good reasons to believe that they were right in their thinking. I don't think there's any clear case to say that one was more right than the other. And I think that comes through in these verses. There is nowhere in these verses where Luke reports to us and Barnabas was right or and Paul was right. He's just presenting to us the facts as a good historian.

Nor do the believers in Antioch here take sides. Have a look again. Verse 39. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Barnabas took Saul and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left. Commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. And I think that applies to both sets of people.

[14:51] Both sets of people were commended by the believers to the grace of God. And so the believers here, they don't take sides. They now prayed for them both as they were heading off in their different directions to Cyprus and to Syria and Cilicia.

And that's an important thing for us. Don't take sides when disagreements come. Secondly, don't be surprised.

Don't be surprised. If and when Christians disagree and if and when, sadly, people fall out with one another, be sad, but don't be surprised.

Human beings, we're all naturally sinful. We're all naturally selfish. We're all going to get things wrong in our humanness. Don't be surprised when church leaders disagree and split apart from one another.

And that's a reason not to put a particular preacher or pastor or church on a pedestal. Because actually, we're human beings.

[16:15] We can disappoint you. I will disappoint you. I will get things wrong. We're human.

Don't put Christian leaders on a pedestal. We're all saved by God's grace. We have our sins forgiven and we praise God for that together and none of us are immune from falling into sin.

Last century, there were two great UK evangelical leaders. There was John Stott, the vicar of All Souls Church in Langham Place and Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, the minister at Westminster Chapel. Both attracted huge numbers of congregations to their churches. Both preached the gospel faithfully. But doesn't mean that they got on.

And there was a very public falling out between these two great evangelical Christian leaders. At an evangelical alliance meeting in 1966, Lloyd-Jones stood up to speak about how we need to come out of denominations where there are people who don't believe the gospel.

[17:38] And he was basically having a go at people like Stott who were in the Church of England. However, John Stott got up and said, I believe history is against Dr.

Lloyd-Jones and that others have tried to do this very thing. I believe that scripture is against him and that the remnant was within the Church and not outside it. Very publicly, John Stott got up and disagreed with Dr.

Martin Lloyd-Jones. Things got awkward between the team. And another great Christian leader from last century was J.I.

Packer. I will know his writings well, but he also fell out with Lloyd-Jones. And yet, despite their differences, Packer could say of Lloyd-Jones, he was the greatest man I ever knew.

They disagreed about things, but still he could say he was the greatest man I ever knew. at the point of me saying all that is that many of us in this room will have been influenced by all three of those people or at least one.

[18:51] I know I've been helped by all three of those people, their writings, but they don't get on well all the time. Don't be surprised when Christians disagree.

don't be surprised when because of our humanness, because of our fallenness, we don't all get on all of the time. Don't take sides, don't be surprised, but do you aim for peace?

Do you aim for peace between brothers and sisters in Christ? When we're disagreeing with one another, if we've fallen out with one another, actually we do need to aim for peace.

God's word makes that clear. Why don't you turn with me to Romans 12, 17 to 18. Romans 12, 17 to 18.

It says this, do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

[20:13] Paul's saying very clearly, if someone's wronged you, don't try to wrong them back. Actually, as far as it is possible, live at peace with everyone.

If you disagree, try and agree in love to disagree with one another well. Agree to find a way forward that seats you both.

I guess the key word there is in verse 18, if possible. Do all you can to keep the peace between yourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ, loving one another, forgiving one another.

But it may not always be possible. Perhaps one party may refuse to work for that peace. Perhaps the disagreement is so bad and so serious that the parting of ways is what is absolutely sadly necessary the way forward.

But hang on, some of you might be thinking, Paul wrote these words in Romans and he doesn't do that here in Acts 15. Isn't he a hypocrite?

[21:29] Well, it seems to me that he learned lessons from this. A few other passages just to look at to show you that I think there was at least some measure of reconciliation between himself, Barnabas, and John Mark.

So, 1 Corinthians 9 verse 6, we see that Barnabas gets a mention. 1 Corinthians 9 verse 6, Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right not to work for a living?

And then there's more mention of Barnabas and John Mark as well in Colossians chapter 4 verse 10. My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas.

You have received instructions about him. If he comes to you, welcome him. Just showing that there seems to have been some sort of reconciliation, peace between these brothers in Christ.

And then just one more for you, 2 Timothy 4, 11. 2 Timothy 4, 11. 2 Timothy 4, 11. Only Luke is with me.

[23:08] Get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in the ministry. Barnabas and Paul split over John Mark and now he says in T. Timothy towards the end of his ministry, get Mark, he's helpful to me.

I think we sometimes say we need to learn the hard way. We learn through the mistakes that we make. I think that's true for Paul.

No doubt he learned from this sharp, sad disagreement. No doubt he asked the Lord for forgiveness to live at peace with all his brothers and sisters was his aim as far as is possible. But why should we aim for peace? If we fall out with someone it can take a lot of work to repair what's been broken.

It can take a lot of work to just even feel like we can sit in the same room as someone we've fallen out with. Why should we aim for peace? Well this morning before us is laid out the Lord's Supper.

[24:28] I think this meal shows us why doesn't it? Because it helps to remind us that once we were living in disagreement with God.

once we weren't God's friends rather we lived wanting to go our own ways not his way. But this meal reminds us that whilst we were enemies Christ died for us.

So there is grace now for me grace for you. now live we now live at peace between ourselves and our maker because of the Lord Jesus who has come to rescue us.

We sang earlier this life we live is not our own for our redeemer paid the price. He took it to be his alone to be his treasure and his prize.

our life has been bought by God. We belong to him and so when we fall out with one another through our disagreements the world may say to us you don't have to do anything just worry about yourself but God says to us I have made peace with you through my son and so now I want you as far as is possible for you to live at peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

[26:17] Ephesians 4 verse 32 Paul wrote these words be kind and compassionate to one another forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you that might be hard for us it's hard to forgive when we feel like we've been wronged it's hard to forgive when someone disagrees with us so so fervently but let's remember the grace that God has shown to us how before God we were rebels we were enemies before him and now we know his great forgiveness and so for us if and when disagreements come if we have fallen out with a brother or sister in Christ that may mean we need to humble ourselves perhaps it may mean we need to say that word sorry or forgive where we have been deeply hurt or felt deeply wronged but this is how

God wants us to honour him we want to be walking in his ways and not in our own ways perhaps perhaps this throws up some things for you that you need to chat through with someone please do find a Christian brother or sister you can chat these things through with or do arrange to chat with me through this week or whenever you need to more than happy to help you because this can be hard do aim for peace forcefully do you remember that God is bigger in this sad disagreement in Acts 15 it's good for us to recognise that all of this is happening under the sovereignty of God to remember that God is bigger than us and our human disagreements and that God's purposes won't be broken even in the messiness of human life we see that the church remains together they commend both of them to the grace of God and we sort of get a better deal here we get a buy one get one free of church missions verse 39 to 41 let's read it again they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus but Paul chose Silas and left commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord he went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches two pairs now go off rather than just Barnabas and Paul going off which means they get to go to more places more churches are encouraged at the same time more people hearing the gospel than would have done if it was just

Paul and Barnabas going off and so it's encouraging to think that when we make mistakes that when we fail that God can use those mistakes for his glory that his kingdom purposes won't be derailed through our selfishness or our sin that encourages me as a pastor in your church that God will even use the bad decisions that I will make encourages me that God is bigger than I am God is bigger than us and we are safe in the hands of the Lord of the church and didn't we cast your mind back to just before Christmas we looked at Matthew 1 at the genealogy there which leads us to the Lord Jesus Christ we noted that God used sinful human beings complete messes of human

relationships

God used them to lead us to his son and Jesus his son has died for every sinful and selfish decision that we make he has paid the price for every falling out between a brother and sister in Christ and he has made peace in his blood between us and God and that's something we can hold on to and we can praise God for together and we get to remember as we take this meal in a moment so when disagreements come don't take signs don't be surprised do aim for peace and do remember that God is bigger we're going to respond by singing this song now we sang it last week as well it's a song to a familiar team and it seems helpful to sing particularly verse 4

[32:09] Lord forgive our sad divisions in your gospel make us one bound together by your spirit brought by Jesus precious blood we'll stand and sing and then David will lead us through our communion time ending Thank you.