

Jesus juva

Sunday, January 4, 2026 | Missio Dei

Week 5 | Acts 15:36-41 | "A Parting of Ways"

READ: Acts 15:36-41 (ESV)

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." 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 ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.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.

Breakups are big news in pop culture. Whether it's in the realm of Hollywood (e.g., Brad Pitt and Jennifer Anniston), music (e.g., the Beatles), politics (e.g., Elon Musk and Donald Trump), or sports (e.g., Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis), whenever two parties go their separate ways, there's bound be drama and a sea of speculation.

Even in Christian circles, people don't always stay together. Sometimes this is due to a moral failure, but not always. Though two individuals may agree on the essentials, they may still disagree on the nonessentials. And, sadly, those disagreements can be so sharp that they can cause those who may be united in Christ to disassociate from each other. Amicable separations are never pleasant, but they're often unavoidable.

What should we do when *genuine* disagreements disrupt the harmony within the community of faith? Though there is no apparent moral failing, should we separate from those we may love but who hold opposing views about important topics? Does *every* parting of the ways harm the testimony of the Church? Does it hinder the work of God? Today's passage helps us answer these questions and provides a guide for navigating difficult situations such as these.

Vs. 36 – The dynamic duo, Paul and Barnabas, want to visit the churches they established on their first missionary journey. Good shepherds do not dine and dash, never to be seen again. They visit the sheep, caring for them and, if need be, correcting them, but always encouraging them.

Vs. 37-39a – Luke reports that, before setting out on their journey, the two men had a *paroxysmos*, translated as “a sharp disagreement.” The term refers to “a state of intense, emotional turmoil”¹ and can carry both negative and positive connotations.

For example, the author of Hebrews uses the same term when he writes, “And let us consider how to stir up [*paroxysmos*] one another to love and good works” (Heb 10:24). The overall sentiment is positive: we should galvanize our fellow Christians in matters of affection and virtue. And yet, Luke uses a cognate of *paroxysmos* in Acts 17:16 when he describes how, when Paul reached Athens, “his spirit was provoked [*paroxynō*] within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” In that context, the overall sentiment is clearly negative. Seeing a lost world, worshipping false gods instead of the Lord God, is deeply disconcerting to followers of God.

Thus, while I would hesitate to color this disagreement in a negative light, since differences aren't inherently bad, this was an *intense* disagreement between close friends, co-ministry partners, and Christian brothers.

What was the catalyst for such an intense conflict between close friends and ministry partners?

John-Mark. Last we heard of John-Mark was in Acts 13. Perhaps, while Barnabas and Paul were in Jerusalem for the discussion regarding circumcision (cf. Ac. 15:2), they were reunited with John-Mark. After all, Jerusalem was his hometown (cf. Ac. 12:12; 13:13). And though he isn't explicitly mentioned, he may even accompanied Paul, Barnabas, Barsabbas, and Silas on their trip back to Antioch (cf. Ac. 15:22).

So, Barnabas wanted to take John-Mark along, while Paul wanted to leave him behind. Barnabas, as he did with Paul (cf. Ac. 9:27), vouched for him, yet ironically Paul disagreed. Why? Luke says, Paul “thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn [*aphistēmi*] from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.”

Unlike the term *proxysmos*, *aphistēmi* has an almost entirely negative connotation. It is used in the LXX to refer to apostasy (e.g., Deut. 7:4; 13:10; 32:15; Josh. 22:18, 23)² and of those who rebel (cf. Gen. 14:4; Psa. 6:9; Den. 9:9). In the NT, Jesus uses it to describe the seed that landed on rocky ground and how, “in time of testing,” it would “fall away [*aphistēmi*]” (Lu. 8:13). And by Paul who said, “in later times some will depart [*aphistēmi*] from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of

¹ Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

² Michael R. Jones, “Apostasy,” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

demons” (1 Ti 4:1). And it described the failed rebellion of Judas the Galilean, who “drew away [*aphistēmi*] some of the people after him” (Ac. 5:37).

Thus, John-Mark’s desertion was a serious infraction. He didn't simply return home due to failing health or some other acceptable reason. He turned his back on the gospel, Paul, and Barnabas. This was both a *spiritual* failure and a *personal* insult.

Admittedly, we must be careful not to *exaggerate* the case against John-Mark, especially since we’re not told the specifics surrounding his departure. Also, it should be noted that Paul isn't advocating excommunication; he just doesn't want John-Mark along on this missionary journey. Nevertheless, the nature of John-Mark’s desertion gave Paul enough cause to forbid him from coming along on this trip.

We might be tempted to criticize Paul, assuming he was bitter or unforgiving. Alternatively, one could argue that Barnabas was motivated by nepotism, given that John-Mark was his cousin (cf. Col. 4:10). Like all ministers, both men were flawed.

Barnabas, along with Peter, will eventually be criticized by Paul for hypocrisy and undermining the gospel’s fundamental truth of equality between Jewish and Gentile believers (cf. Gal. 2:11-14). And Paul himself freely admits that sometimes he does what he shouldn’t, doesn’t do what he should, and, even when he does what’s right, evil is still present within him (cf. Rom. 7:15-21). Though the likes of Paul, Peter, and Barnabas were godly men, they still made mistakes. The only perfect human being who ever existed was Jesus Christ.

But, as far as we can tell here, there’s little evidence to suggest impropriety on either the part of Barnabas or Paul. Luke says, Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Ac. 11:24), and everything we’ve seen of him in Acts has been nothing but praiseworthy. It is doubtful he’d recommend John-Mark, *even if they were related*, unless there was a good reason to do so. And Paul talks about the importance of forgiveness throughout his writings (cf. Eph. 4:26; Col. 3:13; Gal. 6:1), some of which were written while Paul was on his second missionary journey (cf. 1 Thess. 5:15; 2 Thess. 3:15). It is hard to imagine the apostle writing inspired Scripture about such things while, at the same time, holding a grudge against John-Mark.

It is far more likely that Paul was motivated by practical rather than emotional reasons. Given John-Mark’s history and the fact that this journey would likely be just as tricky as the last, it would be nonsensical to insist that he wasn’t a severe liability. After all, depending on the timeline, there’s only about *one* year between Acts 13:13 and 15:37. This may have been

enough time for Barnabas to trust John-Mark again, but no one could blame Paul if he thought the timing was too soon. The ministry is already difficult enough when its ministers are **without** blame; it becomes markedly more difficult when they have a damaged reputation. Though God can and does forgive sin instantly (cf. 1 Jn. 1:9), it nevertheless has consequences.

Takeaway #1: Short-lived sins leave stubborn stains.

After David slept with Bathsheba, he had her husband killed to cover up his sin. Famously, Nathan confronted the king, and David repented, writing one of the best confessions in the whole of Scripture (cf. Ps. 51). But though David's relationship with the Lord had been restored, the child that had been conceived during his affair with Bathsheba would be taken from him as punishment (cf. 2 Sam. 12:13-14).

Sadly, the effects of David's sin do not stop there, but ripple into the lives of his children. In 2 Sam. 13 (the very next chapter), David's son Amnon rapes his half-sister, Tamar. And though David was furious, he did not punish his son. The most likely explanation for David's failure to act was due to the guilt he still felt over his own sexual misconduct.³ Or, as the ESV footnotes put it, "Because of his sin with Bathsheba, David had lost his moral courage and wisdom."⁴

Amnon went unpunished for "two full years," until Tamar's brother, Absalom, took vengeance into his own hands and murdered him while at a feast (cf. 2 Sam. 13:23-29). Shortly after this, Absalom orchestrated a coup, seizing the throne from his father, David. This rebellion did not last long, ending with Absalom being entangled the branches of an oak tree and three javelins being thrust into his heart (cf. 2 Sam. 18:14). However, rather than rejoice at the swift demise of the insurrection, the whole ordeal caused David to mourn. 2 Sam. 19:2, says, "So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, 'The king is grieving for his son.'" David didn't only grieve because his son was dead, but he also grieved because he was the cause of all this heartache. The domino that set off all these horrible events began with David's sin. How much heartache he would've avoided if only he fought alongside Uriah (cf. 2 Sam. 11:1-2), rather than sleeping with his wife.

Admittedly, John-Mark's failings aren't equal to David's. David did far worse things than John-Mark. However, there is a common principle between these two examples: Sin is pleasurable for a season (cf. Heb. 11:25), but its effects linger. I do not say this to shame those who've

³ Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine and P. Keith Gammons, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Incorporated, 2001), 544–545.

⁴ J. I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, and Ajith Fernando, eds., *ESV Global Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 438.

made mistakes; there is always forgiveness for those who repent and turn to the Lord. When it comes to our relationship with God, **we can be restored right where we fall**. This is why it is important to ask for forgiveness the moment you sin. Though restoration/reconciliation with others may take time, there is always hope that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, people will forgive us—e.g., **Corrie Ten Boom forgave the Nazi guard who first imprisoned her and her family**.⁵

However, for the sake of those who've yet to sin in such a way that it's left an indelible mark, I say this: **sin may be sweet to the tongue, but it sours the stomach**. You will save yourself a world of hurt by heading these words. Gal. 6:7-8 says, **"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."** **John-Mark reaped what he sowed that day he abandoned the mission field, and though it seems he had repented, he was still dealing with the fallout**. Say what you will about the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, but if John-Mark were here, he'd agree that such a disagreement would never have occurred if he hadn't failed. If he hadn't abandoned his post during the first missionary journey, there would be no reason for him not go on the second.

Sadly, the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was so sharp that they couldn't reconcile their differences. And so, Luke says, **"they separated from each other."** *Apochōrizō*, translated as **"separated,"** is an intense word.⁶ It is used in Rev. 6:14 to describe how the **"sky vanished [apochōrizō] like a scroll that is being rolled up."** The dynamic duo was no more.

Takeaway #2: Don't confuse **uniformity** of principle with **conformity** of practice.

Paul didn't want to do ministry **with** John-Mark. Barnabas didn't want to do ministry **without** John-Mark. Doubtless, both men had good arguments to support their positions. But they were, nevertheless, at an impasse. What to do? Remain at a stalemate until one of them concedes? Such a victory would be hollow and likely lead to future disagreements. For the sake of the ministry, sometimes separation is best. Better to disband a partnership than a friendship. Better to double a ministry's capacity than dissolve it entirely. **Men of conviction can hold the same creeds but differ in conscience**. And should their disagreements be significant, unfortunately, distance is necessary for the sake of the ministry—e.g., denominations within Protestantism.

⁵ Crocker, Matthew, "The Forgiveness of Corrie Ten Boom," October 12, 2021, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-forgiveness-of-corrie-ten-boom/>, [accessed January 2, 2026].

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 615.

FURTHER STUDY:

Finding the Right Hills to Die On and *The Art of Disagreeing* by Gavin Ortlund

Solomon tells us, “There is a right time for everything, and everything on earth will happen at the right time” (Eccl. 3:1). He then lists several examples, and among them is this: “There is a time to hug someone and a time to stop holding so tightly. There is a time to look for something and a time to consider it lost. There is a time to keep things and a time to throw things away. There is a time to tear cloth and a time to sew it” (Ecc. 3:5b-7a). Though dissociation should never be pursued, it is sometimes inevitable. In such cases, it is best to leave things in the hands of the Lord, who, like a master seamstress, can mend what has been torn.

Vs. 29b-41 – Luke says, “Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas...and went through Syria and Cilicia.” Barnabas was a “native of Cyprus” (Ac. 4:36), so his return there was quite natural. This “Silas” is the same “Silas” who was, along with “Barsabbas,” sent to confirm the ruling that Gentile believers need not be circumcised (cf. Ac. 15:22). He had the gift of prophecy (cf. Ac. 15:32). Though he had returned to Jerusalem (15:33), he had apparently made his way back to Antioch.⁷ Just as Barnabas was from Cyprus, so was Paul from Tarsus, a town in “Cilicia.”

Luke says Paul and Silas were “commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord,” but he doesn’t say the same of Barnabas and John-Mark. Does this imply that Paul’s judgment was favored over that of Barnabas? Perhaps. But arguably, the phrase could be read to mean that both Barnabas/John-Mark and Paul/Silas were “commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.” Such a reading would imply that, rather than the church in Antioch taking either side, it left the issue in God’s hands.⁸

But, even if Luke was only talking about Paul/Silas, as the majority of commentators think,⁹ it doesn’t mean Barnabas and John-Mark were’n’t sent with the church’s blessing.¹⁰ Luke has tailored his account to focus on Paul rather than Barnabas. We mustn’t read criticism into the silence. If Barnabas/John-Mark hadn’t gone with the brothers’ approval, doubtless Luke

⁷ Luke mentions that the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul occurred “after some days” (vs. 36), indicating it didn’t happen *immediately* after the previous events. Thus, while it is impossible to know how much time had passed, it was enough for Silas to go back to Jerusalem and return to Antioch.

⁸ Peterson, David G., *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 449.

⁹ Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Acts*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 663; Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 520; Stott, John R. W., *The Message of Acts*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, Revised Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020), 234-235.

¹⁰ Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014) 3:2310.

would've said more, given that such a scenario would indicate ***spiritual disunity*** rather than a ***professional disagreement***.

Moreover, **although a schism had developed, it did not last.** We know that, eventually, this situation pans out. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, writing approximately four years after the events of Ac. 15, he cast Barnabas in a favorable light (cf. 1 Cor. 9:6).¹¹ Furthermore, Paul mentions John-Mark multiple times in his letters (cf. Philemon 24; Col. 4:10), and, as with Barnabas, there is no hint of any animosity. In fact, one of the last things that Paul ever wrote was to Timothy, telling him, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Ti 4:11).¹² And, **probably most encouraging of all is the fact that John-Mark is the author of the Gospel of Mark,** widely regarded as the first gospel ever written. A man who was once rejected by the apostle Paul paved the way for Matthew, Luke, and John.

Takeaway #3: Without grace, truth is **pessimistic**; without truth, grace is **idealistic**; but together, they're **dynamic**.

John says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:14, 16-17). Jesus perfectly balanced the tension between truth and grace. He was 100% true and 100% gracious all the time.

One of the best examples of this is seen in the story of the woman caught in adultery. When the Lord said, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn. 8:7). But, as the story goes, no one stoned her, and, eventually, she was left alone with Jesus. The Lord said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (Jn. 8:10-11).

Now, he wasn't denying that the woman was dead to rights. According to the OT, adultery was a capital offense, though, admittedly, *both* parties were supposed to be stoned (cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). If you think that too harsh, you do not understand how truly egregious the sin of adultery is in the eyes of God. Jesus could've stoned that woman right then and there, and he would've been perfectly just in doing so. However, as the Lord himself said, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3:17). The truth of

¹¹ Paul began his second missionary journey around 49 AD, and 1 Corinthians was written while Paul was in Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8, 19), around 53 AD.

¹² 2 Timothy was written around 65 AD, roughly 15 years after the events of Acts 15.

the woman's sinfulness was already established; what she needed was grace. And this is what the Lord gave her that day. He didn't affirm her sin, but he did offer her a second chance.

Without grace, truth hardens into impractical idealism; without truth, grace drifts into illogical optimism. But together, they become both productive and positive—qualities every project and every person needs to flourish. It's restorative and transformative. The woman needed her sin exposed and expunged if she was ever to grow. Likewise, John-Mark needed someone to speak undiluted truth (Paul) into his life and to give him undeserved grace (Barnabas). Everyone needs a Paul, and everyone needs a Barnabas if they're ever going to grow in their Christian walk.

Luke tells us that as Paul traveled throughout "Syria and Cilicia," he and Silas were "strengthening the churches." The same could be said of Barnabas and John-Mark. According to church tradition, Barnabas went on to have a fruitful ministry, eventually being martyred on Cyprus sometime between AD 53 and 75.¹³ Since the time of Tertullian (160-240AD), he has been considered a possible author of the Book of Hebrews.¹⁴ Thus, despite their disagreements, the church wasn't weakened but strengthened all the more. This is a testament to God's sovereignty.

Takeaway #4: God is no more **aided** by our strengths than he is **hindered** by our weaknesses.

Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." Proverbs says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand" (Pro. 19:21). Job tells the Lord, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job. 42:2). Paul said, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). God is not dependent upon anyone; his mission is bigger than any one minister or ministry and, no matter what, he will accomplish his work, even though ministries separate.

Soli Deo Gloria

¹³ Bandy, Alan S., *An Illustrated Guide to the Apostle Paul: His Life, Ministry, and Missionary Journeys*, (<https://ref.ly/res/LLS:NLLSTRDMSJRNYS/2021-08-06T19:38:17Z/105310?len=128>), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 53.

¹⁴ Walls, A. F., "Barnabas," (<https://ref.ly/res/LLS:14.0.1/2023-07-20T01:22:06Z/769191?len=90>), In *New Bible Dictionary*, edited by D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, 3rd ed., (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 123.

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