



WHEN LEADERS DISAGREE

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 15:36–16:5

32nd Message

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The Boys in the Boat is the stirring story of the University of Washington's eight-oar crew that transformed the sport and captured the hearts of millions of Americans in the aftermath of the Depression. The heart of the story centers around Joe Rantz, a teenager abandoned by his family. Plagued with personal demons and poverty, he rowed to repair his sense of self which had been shattered. George Pocock, a visionary and master boat builder became a mentor to Joe and, after observing his rowing skills, pulled him aside for what turned out to be a life-changing conversation.

He told Joe that there were times when he seemed to think that he was the only fellow in the boat, as if it was up to him to row the boat across the finish line all by himself. When a man rowed like that, he said, he was bound to attack the water rather than to work with it, and worse, he was bound not to let his crew help him row.

He suggested that Joe think of a well-rowed race as a symphony, and himself as just one player in the orchestra. If one fellow in an orchestra was playing out of tune, or playing at different tempo, the whole piece would naturally be ruined. That's the way it was with rowing. What mattered more than how hard a man rowed was how well everything he did in the boat harmonized with what the other fellows were doing. And a man couldn't harmonize with his crewmates unless he opened his heart to them. He had to care about his crew. It wasn't just the rowing but the crewmates that he had to give himself up to, even if it meant getting his feelings hurt.

Pocock paused and looked up at Joe. If you don't like some fellow in the boat, Joe, you have to learn to like him. It has to matter to you whether he wins the race, not just whether you do..." And he concluded with a remark that Joe would never forget. "Joe, when you really start trusting those other boys, you will feel a power at work within you that is far beyond anything you've ever imagined. Sometimes, you will feel as if you have rowed right off the planet and are rowing among the stars.¹

It was this vision of working with one mind and heart that had them "rowing among the stars" and winning gold before Adolf Hitler's gaze at the 1936 "Nazi Olympics" in Berlin. Jesus gave voice the same vision for his disciples just before his impending death,

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20–21 ESV)

Jesus intended the Messianic Age to be characterized by a new humanity whose bonds transcended all sexual, racial and national barriers. Seven weeks after Jesus was raised from the dead, the Holy Spirit was unleashed upon his disciples and the longing became a reality, as the disciples shared all of life together with one heart and mind (Acts 2:46–47). As the gospel spread out into the Roman world, the apostles broke with all cultural norms and embraced

Gentiles on equal footing with their Jewish brothers and sisters. This was a tremendous challenge as, as N. T. Wright observes,

There really was no analogy in the ancient world for a movement of this kind... The challenge facing Paul and the others was how to live as an extended family without ties of kinship or ancestral symbols, without the geographical focus on Jerusalem and the Temple, and without a central authority like that of Caesar.²

The formation of these new communities posed a huge threat to the conventional patterns of communal life. In spite of fierce, violent opposition by hardline Jews, Paul heroically fought to preserve the status of the Gentiles (Gal 2:11–14; Acts 15:1–2). Paul understood that the unity of the church was grounded in the very nature of the triune God—"There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4–6). The conflict was finally settled in Jerusalem as the apostles and elders confirmed the evangelistic work of Paul and Barnabas. "If the other nations were now coming in, then a new dispensation had been inaugurated for which the Mosaic restrictions were no longer relevant."³ After this ruling, all of the dissension and division dissipated, giving way to a supernatural spirit of peace that unified the whole church, preserving its unity as it advanced toward new frontiers with a new identity.

But sadly, unity is threatened once again. As the apostles consider undertaking a second missionary venture to return to the cities where they proclaimed the gospel, a "sharp disagreement" occurs at the highest levels of leadership. Luke doesn't gloss over it. Emotions get heated, tempers rise and a fissure erupts with leaders parting ways.

I. A Return Trip: Disagreement and Division (Acts 15:36–41)

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." Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 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. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

After several months teaching and preaching in Antioch, Paul takes the initiative to plan a second missionary trip "to visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord." The term "visit" has the sense of "exercising watchful care and oversight" on behalf of someone. Its related noun, *episkopos* ("overseer"), was used for the office of elder, as one who watches over the flock with care. Jesus' mandate was "to make disciples" of all nations, not merely converts. Paul's burden for the churches of southern Anatolia was especially acute after he wrote the letter of Galatians and now he is deeply concerned to know how things have turned out.

In response to Paul's plan, Barnabas expresses his desire to take John Mark along to give him a second chance. But Paul will not consider it and an impasse results with neither leader being willing to budge. Dialogue ceases, emotions rise, and then things get ugly. Dr. Luke labels it a *paroxysmos*, a medical term for a severe fever that brings on a convulsion. "It carries overtones of severely heightened emotions, red and distorted faces, loud voices, things said that were better left unsaid. A sorry sight."⁴

Imagine the shock of the young believers in Antioch witnessing the founding fathers of the church yelling at each other until finally Barnabas storms out of the church and slams the door behind him. What happened to "one mind and heart"? Sadly this is all too common. I'm encouraged that Luke doesn't omit it, but wants us to reflect and learn valuable lessons:

- What was the nature of the disagreement?
- How should it have been handled?
- What are the implications for life and ministry?
- What does God do when things are not resolved amicably?

A. What was the nature of the disagreement?

Often church splits occur over issues of pride, power, money or moral failure, but in this case the motivations are pure. As Craig Keener astutely observes, "When partners differ over which absolute values take priority—in this case, loyalty or forgiveness, on the one hand, and expectation of wholehearted commitment, on the other—conflict appears inevitable."⁵ Barnabas is the "Son of Encouragement" and sees God's potential in people. For Paul to call his judgment into question was like a slap in the face, when ten years earlier he had been Paul's advocate before the apostles in Jerusalem (9:27). Where would Paul be today if Barnabas had not risked his reputation for a former persecutor and then given him the stage to become a great teacher and evangelist? Why shouldn't they do the same with John Mark? The other driving factor is that Mark is Barnabas' cousin; he is family. Paul's insistence puts Barnabas in the unenviable position of choosing between his loyalty to Paul or to his family.

For Paul, Barnabas' request reignites old wounds. When Jewish hardliners came to Antioch, insisting that fraternizing with Gentiles had to stop, Barnabas' tendency to be conciliatory caused him to compromise the fundamental principle of the gospel. Paul was shocked when Peter caved in to the pressure, but it was a greater blow when, "even Barnabas," his trusted friend and colleague "was led away by their hypocrisy" (Gal 2:13). Though they presumably reconciled, that incident made Paul wonder if he could trust Barnabas' judgment in the future. Would this happen again in the heat of battle?

Bringing up Mark's name confirms his fears. Family feelings have no place in the mission of God's kingdom. Paul expected his coworkers in ministry to be as disciplined soldiers, willing to endure hardships and to share in his suffering (2 Tim 2:3–4). From his point of view, Mark was guilty of desertion before the mission had even begun. The call to mission was not a matter of human choice, but of divine commission; commitment to it was not therefore a matter of convenience, but faithfulness (see 1 Cor 9:16–18). With his history of desertion, taking him along would put their team at risk, not to mention raising suspicions of nepotism.

With emotions running deep, dialogue ends and the two leaders part ways.

B. How should it have been handled?

Looking back with hindsight it's easy to see how the situation could have been handled. A wise counselor could have interceded with some cool-headed objectivity and pointed out that based on their gifts and calling, both of their perspectives had merit. Barnabas had the gift of encouragement and nurturing disciples took precedence over evangelism. Paul was called as an apostle to the nations and his mission took precedence over the spiritual formation of his team.

Secondly, both Barnabas and Paul were gifted leaders but because of their gifts and calling they led differently. As had become clear on the first journey, a mission can have only one leader. When the mission was launched in Cyprus, Barnabas was the senior leader. But it wasn't long before Paul's initiative and gifts demonstrated that he was better suited for that role and Barnabas gave way (Acts 13:9–11). By the time the trio sets sail from Cyprus to Perga, Luke identifies them as "Paul and his companions" (13:13).

With the opportunity for a second mission trip, Barnabas' passions as an encourager are reignited and he longs to do for John Mark what he did for Paul in Antioch. But doing this on a divinely commissioned mission trip led by Paul is out of the question. So wisdom would dictate two mission trips not one.

Ironically God's hand seems to have overruled in the midst of their angry departure, orchestrating two mission trips with teams united in *one* purpose. Barnabas went back to his home territory of Cyprus where Mark could be embraced and nurtured by family while Paul launched out with Silas to visit churches in Asia Minor. Silas (or Silvanus, 2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 1:1) was an excellent choice for Paul. He was a gifted prophet, highly respected in Jerusalem (Acts 15:27) and his status as a Roman citizen would prove to be of great benefit for their ministry in Roman cities. Together Paul and Silas set out on foot north to Cilicia, the land of his birth, delivering the decrees from Jerusalem and "strengthening the churches."

C. What are the implications for life and ministry?

The nature of Paul and Barnabas' disagreement and its outcome has important implications for our lives and ministries. First, as Keener points out, disagreement can easily arise in the body of Christ when individuals disagree over which absolute values take priority. Priorities run deep and are driven by our spiritual gifts (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:1–11; Eph 4:7–16; 1 Pet 4:10–11), which are God's channel of love to build up the body of Christ "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). Both Paul and Barnabas were motivated by love for what God had gifted them to do. As Paul would later write, "when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). Had you asked Barnabas what compels him to nurture and encourage young believers, he would have said the same thing—"the love of Christ compels me!" In my experience I've discovered that the older I get, the greater is my passion to love others through my particular gifts.

Secondly, all the gifts are needed. God cares just as much about restoring one failed servant as he does for evangelizing lost souls. Two mission trips were not a compromise, they were ideal. What was sorely lacking in Paul and Barnabas' dispute was mutual admiration and respect for the other person's gifts and unique calling. Had they recognized that, the result would have been the same, but the mission trips would have been launched in an atmosphere of peace and unity instead of anger and distrust.

Third, the kingdom of God is an organic reality for which growth and change is the norm. The goal of leaders, whether in leading a church or a small group, is not to endlessly preside over their flock, but to train new leaders to lead in new ways according to their giftedness (2 Tim 2:2; Eph 4:11-2). Earlier in Acts, Philip and Stephen were set aside as deacons, but they soon outgrew their roles. Philip became a gifted evangelist and Stephen's prophetic gift and passionate witness at his execution played a huge part in Saul's conversion. Though it's difficult when people move on to start new things, we should rejoice that this is way the kingdom grows.

Fourth, the same principle applies to marriage. Many conflicts arise in marriage because the husband and wife are gifted differently. A healthy marriage allows both husband and wife to uniquely flourish according to their giftedness, which means that they take turns being the "helper" so their spouse can lead with their gift. As someone who profoundly enjoys conversation around the table at a meal, I recently had the privilege of being the waiter, dishwasher and witness to my wife hosting a fabulous evening at our home, where she came to life leading our guests in appreciation for a couple who was moving away. Hearing the joyous laughter around the table while I stood in the background washing dishes was the most fulfilling moment of my week.

Back to our story and Luke will answer our final question, "What does God do when things are not resolved amicably?" in the final verses.

II. Strengthening New Foundations (Acts 16:1-5)

A. Strengthening the team (16:1-3)

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

As Paul and Silas deliver the decrees to the churches in Cilicia and Syria, they come to Lystra. On Paul's first visit he had healed a lame man and the crowds mistook he and Barnabas for Greek gods. Then Jews came from Pisidian, Antioch and Iconium and turned the crowd against Paul. "They stoned him and dragged him out of the city, supposing he was dead" (14:19). I wonder what emotions he felt as he re-entered that city? Wonder of wonders, instead of "strengthening the church," God "strengthens the team" with the addition of an assistant to replace Mark. Timothy was intimately acquainted with Paul's sufferings in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium and was perhaps an eyewitness of his stoning in Lystra (2 Tim 3:11). Paul's ministry must have left a deep impression on this young man's faith. He had an outstanding reputation among the community and became one of Paul's most faithful disciples. Wright suggests that,

Paul was by this time in his late thirties or early forties (assuming he was born by AD 10 at the latest). Timothy, most likely in his late teens or early twenties, must have seemed like the son that Paul never had. Certainly a bond of understanding and mutual trust developed between them of the sort that happened with few others.

Timothy was the son of a believing Jewish woman named Eunice, and his father was Greek. Both Timothy's mother, Eunice, and grandmother Lois had a strong faith and had taught Timothy the Scriptures from childhood (2 Tim 1:5, 3:15). The fact that he was not

circumcised may suggest that his parents were not on the same page spiritually. In any case, Timothy's status in both communities would be ambiguous. To prevent any stumbling blocks among the Jews whom they desired to reach, Paul had him circumcised. Paul insisted that Gentile Christians should not be compelled to be circumcised because the cross had made the Mosaic laws obsolete and by submitting to circumcision it would place them under obligation to keep the whole Law (Gal 5:3). In Timothy's case the operation served a practical purpose, not a religious one. As Paul would later write, "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" (1 Cor 9:20).

B. Strengthening the churches in faith (16:4-5)

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

With the team threefold strong (Ecc 4:12) and united in purpose, they made their way through the cities where Paul had preached the gospel, delivering the decrees from Jerusalem. The result was that the churches were "strengthened" in faith and also grew in number. As Keener affirms, "The apostolic model was not just evangelism but planting self-propagating churches that would continue to evangelize their communities."⁷

Our text which began with disagreement and division ends with a strong and unified team strengthening the churches in faith and growing numerically within their communities. How gracious is our God! Instead of setting Paul and Barnabas aside because of their angry split, he allows each to function according to their divine gifting with colleagues more suited to complement their gifts and personality.

But you may be asking, whatever happened to Mark? What is the end of the story? As God has committed us to a ministry of reconciliation, so God works the wheels of history to bring about our reconciliation with those who have wounded us, or with those whom we may have wounded.

III. What Happened to Mark?

For Mark came the painful realization that the whirl of life that was going on around him had nothing to do with him or his character. He was being buoyed along on the stream of success by the life and character of others. It was not because of who he was, but because of who he knew and where he grew up. How painful it must have been for Mark to be labeled a failure and shunned by the leading apostle of the Christian movement. Yet he could not hide. His own home was still the center for Christian life for Jerusalem. Everywhere he turned and every face he met reminded him of his failure.

What does God do when we come to the painful realization that we are failures? The good news of the gospel is that God does not discard us. Instead, he uses our failure as the gateway to make us his servants.

A. Embraced by family who believed in him

Barnabas, the one who believed that "the man is more important than the mission," takes Mark back to Cyprus (Acts 15:39), to serve on a smaller scale mission. God doesn't throw away his failed servants. He grants them new opportunities of service on a smaller scale under

the umbrella of acceptance. There is nothing more motivating than having people believe in you, especially members of your own family.

B. Embraced by an apostle who understood failure

Mark is then given even more privilege and opportunity in his association with Peter. This apostle, a man who well understood the meaning of failure, drew him under his wing and adopted him as his own son (1 Peter 5:13). “Son” was an endearing term used by the rabbis for special pupils whom they desired to pour their lives into. The young man without a father is now adopted by a man who longed for sons. Because of these two relationships, Mark is restored to service. He would go on to become a worldwide traveler for the gospel, his journeys taking him to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Rome and Egypt.

C. Restored to the one who rejected him

When Mark is presented with the right opportunity, he goes back to the one who scathingly criticized and rejected him, the apostle Paul, and serves him at a time when he is most vulnerable in prison (Col 4:10). Such a visit proved most healing, so that at the end of Paul’s life, in yet another prison, it is Mark whom the apostle deeply longs for and requests to visit him, since “he is useful to me for service” (2 Tim 4:11). What a turn around. Here is a man given the highest accolade of servant by the very one who once labeled him as unfit for service. It takes great humility to set aside your pride to love and serve the one who initially rejected you, yet it was this humility that birthed a new creativity in Mark.

D. Restored to holy service

Not only did Mark become humble, he also became inventive. As the apostles were aging and dying, and with them, their first-hand testimony about Jesus, Mark felt the necessity to preserve the oral teachings of Peter in some kind of written form. Mark had some background in languages. He knew Aramaic, a little Hebrew and he could read and write in Latin and Greek, even if his Greek was a bit rough. So he decided to use his languages for the Lord, to be the first to commit to writing the oral traditions about Jesus and his ministry. As Michael Green suggests, “the written form is as new as the gospel which it enshrines.” It was Mark who invented this new literary form of the gospel and deposited it for future generations.

Mark’s gospel was held in such high repute that both Matthew and Luke used it as the basis for their longer, more elaborate versions of the gospel. But Mark was the first to write down the account, so we can credit him with the invention of a brand new literary genre, the gospel.

E. Took the lead in innovation

Mark also is credited by some scholars as being a key figure in the development of the *codex* (Latin for a “bound book”). Before this time most writing was done on scrolls. These were large, cumbersome documents that only the elite could afford. But someone came up with the idea of creating a new way of preserving writings in a bound form, using papyrus or parchment, held together with a wooden cover. This new book form (the *codex*) made writing more accessible and easier to distribute, and it was much used by Christians. An overwhelming percentage of the codex material that we now possess from the second century is Christian. Mark could well have been one of the pioneers in this communications revolution.

F. Finished the race well

Finally, we are told by the later church fathers that when Mark grew older, he went beyond his role as servant and became an evangelist. The fourth-century church historian Eusebius said of him: “Mark was the first to be sent to Egypt and proclaimed the gospel he had written and first established the church in Alexandria”⁸ (EC 2.16.1). Michael Green summarizes Mark’s story in these words:

God takes failures and makes them saints. Mark took his second chance. He turned his family pride into love and submission to one who had rejected him; turned his cowardice into courage, and went to prison serve Paul; turned his return home into a new, daring creativity and new literary form; and moving beyond his role as servant, took on the apostolic role itself.⁹

As God has given us the a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), I close with this prayer:

May God grant us the grace,
that we remain a place
of the Father’s tender touch
and quickened pace
to seek and save
Mark’s lost and lonely face
and in the warmth
of holy embrace
restore them one and all
servants of the King.
Amen.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom 15:5–7)

1. Daniel James Brown, *The Boys in the Boat* (New York: Viking, 2013), 234–45.
2. N. T. Wright, *Paul, A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 163.
3. Wright, *Paul*, 166.
4. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 13–28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 53.
5. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:2299.
6. Wright, *Paul*, 175.
7. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2311.
8. Eusebius, *H.E.* 2.16.1
9. All references to Michael Green are taken from his lectures on the Gospel of Mark at Regent College, Vancouver B.C.