



"A Pastoral Letter"

The Way of the Spirit

Acts 15:22-35

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Introduction.

Recently we celebrated Mother's Day, and it was a special time to honor moms for all the ways they are a blessing to us. However, I couldn't help but miss my own mother who died six-and-a-half years ago at the age of 89. Even though she's been gone for a number of years, I still miss her.

One thing that helped ease the pain for me in the season of loss after her death was coming across a copy of a letter I sent her two weeks before she died. I realized my mother's health was declining and she might not be around very long, so I decided to write her a letter. I wanted to make sure I took the time to tell her just how special she was and how much I loved her and how much I appreciated all the things she did for me over the years.

When she received the letter, she called and left a voice mail at our home. I saved the recording of it for many years on a cassette tape. In the message she said through her tears how grateful she was for the letter and how much it meant to her, but that she didn't deserve it. Then she talked about answered prayer and God's faithfulness in her continuing health struggles. To the very end, she was thanking God. Two months later, she was gone. Missing her today, I'm so glad I wrote that letter.

This morning we study a passage of Scripture which talks about another letter, but this letter wasn't written from a son to his mother. It was a letter from the Mother church in Jerusalem to the Gentile churches of the ancient world. We would do well to take a look at it together.

I. A Personal Touch.

You'll recall from our study in Acts a couple of weeks ago that the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to consider the developments regarding the mission to the Gentiles. They were asked to decide whether or not they believed these new converts had to submit themselves to the requirements of Jewish circumcision and observance of the OT Law in order to receive salvation. The elders listened to the testimony of Peter, Paul and Barnabas and their witness about the incredible things God was doing among the Gentiles. James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, also spoke, and he said that Scripture, reason and experience all affirmed the fact that Gentiles should not be forced to meet these requirements to be received into the church. It was the work of Christ on the cross plus nothing else that saves a person.

The Council in Jerusalem agreed, so James proposed that a letter be written to communicate their decision, as well as their advice regarding abstinence in three areas of behavior out of cultural sensitivity to Jewish Christians as well as the need to avoid sexual immorality. The text also tells us *"the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to*



choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas), and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers" (15:22).

I want you to notice the personal touch in the action the Jerusalem Council took. They could have simply sent the letter, but they also sent people. They could have simply empowered Barnabas and Paul to carry the news, but they sent personal emissaries to interpret their decision. Judas, called Barsabbas, was no doubt a Hebrew-speaking believer, and Silas, whose Latin name was Silvanus was a Hellenistic Jew who was also a Roman citizen. The Council sent these two men, one a Hebrew-speaking Jew and the other a Greek-speaking Jew familiar with Roman culture and customs. They sent people as well as a letter.

A personal touch can mean so much. All of us have at one time or another benefited from the way in which the presence of another person changed an otherwise cold and difficult situation. We're in the midst of grief and can hardly find the energy to make dinner. We could run out to Chick Fill-A and order take-out, but then someone from the iCare network in our church knocks on our door with a meal in hand and a smile on their face. That personal touch makes all the difference in the world.

There was once a man who went to a mission hospital in Pakistan, and he walked a long way and passed by a government hospital to get there. When they asked him why he traveled so far and didn't simply go to the government hospital, he answered, "The medicine is the same, but the hands are different." That's the power of personal touch.

Whenever possible, ministry in the name of Jesus Christ should be "hand-delivered." When you correct someone at work, do you send an email, or do you do it in person? Rebukes are better "hand-delivered." We rely on email far too much these days, and it's easy for tone and nuance to get lost in what we try to communicate. A personal touch is all the more important nowadays.

The message which the leaders of the church in Jerusalem sent was a message that was "hand-delivered" to the believers in Antioch, and it made a big difference. That should be a lesson for us today.

II. A Letter of Clarification.

In the letter the Jerusalem church and its leaders made 3 important points. **First**, they disassociated themselves from the Judaizers. **Second**, they said they were now were sending Judas and Silas to confirm in person what the Council was communicating in writing. And **third**, they shared their unanimous decision not to burden the Gentile converts with anything beyond a request to be sensitive to the scruples of Jewish Christians regarding four areas of life which were particularly troubling to believers from a Jewish background. The letter concludes with the advice, *"You will do well to avoid these things" (15:29).*

The letter the leaders of the church in Jerusalem wrote confronted the Judaizers' claims and clarified the Jerusalem Council's position on the matter. On the fundamental question of the necessity of circumcision and Jewish lifestyle for Gentile Christians, the letter rebuked the Judaizers for going beyond their authority and it assured the readers that there was no such requirement for salvation. However, they added a caution which reminds us all that whenever possible we should be careful to do nothing which might cause another person to stumble in the faith. Sensitivity to the scruples of others and granting relief of conscience has always been a hallmark of the Christian faith, and while avoiding sexual immorality does not bring a person



salvation, it does demonstrate the fruit of righteousness which should mark the follower of Christ.

III. A Sharp Dispute.

Up to this point, Paul and Barnabas had been a team. For many years, they had worked together. It was Barnabas who had first taken Paul under his wing. When everyone else was afraid of Paul after he became a Christian, it was Barnabas who befriended him and introduced him to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. When the church in Antioch needed a gifted teacher, it was Barnabas who traveled to Tarsus and persuaded Paul to come and help him lead the church. And it was Paul and Barnabas who had been sent out as the first missionaries ever.

Now that the controversy over the matter of circumcision had been settled, Barnabas and Paul decided it was time to revisit the cities in which they had planted churches during their first missionary journey. However, a dispute arose between them which involved missionary strategy and personnel. The sticking point centered around a young man named John Mark, who was Barnabas' cousin. You'll recall that he accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first journey, but Mark abandoned them in the middle of it. Perhaps he got homesick, or he had a hard time adjusting to the rigors of international travel and missionary life. Regardless of the reason, John Mark deserted the team in Pamphylia and returned home.

As they made plans for their second missionary journey, Barnabas suggested they take John Mark along with them again and that Mark be given a second chance. However, Paul was not willing to take the risk, and he refused to allow the young man to accompany them. The disagreement became so intense that Paul and Barnabas decided to separate and part company. Barnabas took Mark with him, and they headed off to Cypress while Paul took Silas, one of the emissaries who brought the letter from Jerusalem, and they traveled to other cities in Syria and Cilicia.

Who was right, and who was wrong in this disagreement? It's hard to say, and Luke makes no judgment. Both Barnabas and Paul had good reasons for their respective positions, and I'm sure each one thought he was right in his own decision. I'm also sure each one prayed about the matter and thought he was doing the will of God. Still, it pains us to see Christians disagree and part company.

However, unity in the body of Christ has never required uniformity, and there are times when good Christians disagree, and sometimes they go their separate ways. When Lorie and I lived in Dallas, the church we served there went through a split. It was a very painful experience for everyone. Lorie and I had many friends who were on the other side of the debate than we were, and they left and started a new church down the street. We parted company and went our separate ways in obedience to God's call in our respective lives.

In my previous church we lost some people when we decided to do a building program. We lost some other people when we decided to call a woman as an associate pastor. It always hurts whenever people feel led by God out of conviction to go their separate ways. However, I draw comfort from this passage because it reassures us that even the best of Christians will disagree with one another, and sometimes they need to part company.

The irony is not lost on me that we are studying this passage on a Sunday after you received a letter from Paul Gamel and me on behalf of the Denominational Relations Committee of Session regarding a contentious issue in the PCUSA which people in our denomination have



been fighting about for 35 years. It is also a Sunday when we are going to have a congregational town hall meeting to discuss these things together. It's important that as we engage in conversation about these potentially divisive matters we try to reflect the love of Jesus Christ for one another, we give each other the benefit of the doubt, we pursue a path of peace and reconciliation wherever possible, and we don't demonize people who may disagree with us. Good Christians will come to different conclusions about the ordination of homosexuals, and as we wrestle with this thorny issue in the days to come let's agree to disagree agreeably, for this will honor the Lord and lessen the damage of our witness to a watching world.

Conclusion.

In closing, there is one last thing I want you to note from this passage. While it's clear that Paul did not want to have anything to do with John Mark in his missionary travels at that particular point in time, this was not the end of the story. Evidently, Mark learned his lesson from his former failure, and he was effective as a colleague in ministry with Barnabas. Sometime later, Mark returned from his work with Barnabas and became associated with the apostle Peter (1Pt. 5:13). Then during Paul's first imprisonment about 12 years later, Mark was included in Paul's group of fellow ministers (Col. 4:10). And by the end of Paul's life, he came to admire Mark so much that he asked him to come be with Paul during his final days of life (2Tim. 4:11). That's another reason why grace is so important in the midst of differences, because disagreements aren't always the final word. Regarding differences in the PCUSA, someone has rightly said Presbyterians were born to fight and reunite!

This story also serves as a reminder that a person's failure does not have to be the last word about them. It doesn't have to be the thing that defines us. You and I can learn from our mistakes and move our lives in a different direction, and we can extend grace to others when they fail us and give them a second chance, too.

Gordon MacDonald, who preached here last fall, writes about a young man he once knew who was 20-years-old. Looking back, Gordon didn't like the guy very much. The young man was self-absorbed and directionless, and his life appeared to be unraveling. He was on the verge of academic probation at the university, and his parents were on the verge of divorce. Financially, he lived from day to day, and his personal life was undisciplined and disorganized. He was a people-pleaser, and he often made promises he didn't keep.

It would be easy to write this young man off. One would not be inclined to think that he was going to amount to anything in the kingdom of God. However, we would be wrong to write off this young man, because that young man was Gordon MacDonald himself when he was a 20-year-old student at the University of Colorado. God did a great work in turning Gordon around, and He can do the same for you and me.

Thanks be to God that we have a Savior who is in the business of giving us second chances! May we take God's word seriously when Paul writes in his own letter later on to the Christians in Corinth, *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Behold, the old has gone, and the new has come"* (2Cor. 5:17). Amen.

