

It was 9:59 a.m. on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 when United Airlines Flight 175 hit the south tower of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan in New York City – the first of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda against the United States. The four attacks killed 2,977 people, injured over 25,000 others, and caused over \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage - and as well, launched the entire world into a War on Terror which has had a dramatic effect on us all. Almost everyone remembers where they were when heard of the attacks– and most of us also remember the unity that occurred in North America and between nations throughout the world, on the terrible day. But it didn’t take long for people in North America to start pointing fingers and for nations to fall back into their positioning and posturing of the past – and the unity that was born through terror soon unraveled – because *we all forgot who our enemy is*. Sadly the very same happens within the church. We, as sheep, can so easily begin to point fingers at other sheep and we can also easily become critical of our shepherds - all the while forgetting that we have a common enemy outside the walls of the church. Satan seeks to “steal, kill, and destroy” Let’s not ever forget who the enemy is.

In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul writes: *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. . . until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:1-3; 13). In 1 Corinthians 12:12 he also tells us: *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”* These verses in God’s Word tell us, that as followers of Jesus in the church, there is the bond of unity that is like one body, yet there is room for variety. But the devil loves to disrupt unity. Two cats tied together by their tails and thrown over a clothesline may be united - but they do not have unity.

American writer and humorist Mark Twain used to say he put a dog and a cat in a cage together as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, a pig and goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist and soon there was not a living thing left. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter’s night. He said, “The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth - but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt each another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth’s winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.” That could also be said about the church, but Jesus gives us an alternative: forgiving each other for the pokes we receive.

Now by this time, none of this should surprise us. Back in Acts 13 God’s Word taught us that when the church does seek to focus on the main business of the church, the church will experience conflict and opposition, from without – and *from within*. Jesus promised us that would happen. In Matthew 10:34 he said: *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* All throughout our walk through the book of Acts we have seen that when we take a stand for Jesus Christ, and when we share the glorious grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will encounter opposition and experience conflict – both from without and *from within*. The gospel is the good news, but it’s also the good news that divides – both in the world and sadly also in the church. Evidence of that can be seen in that the primary reason the apostles wrote the letters that we have included in the New Testament was to deal with issues that were creating conflict and division within the church. But the truth is, most of the sinful conflicts and shameful divisions among Christians are over petty issues. While we should avoid such selfish squabbling, our text today tells us that there is one issue we should never be divided over - *that’s when it’s about salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ*. The progress of the Gospel has often been hindered by people with closed minds who stand in front of open doors and block the way for others. Followers of Jesus must be diligent to maintain Gospel unity in the church.

As we step into Acts 15 this morning we find ourselves facing the most hotly contested theological debate of the early church, which was: “What is the nature of the gospel?” Or more specifically: “Is salvation through Jesus Christ – who is the one who came to die on a cross, in our place, for the penalty of our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God, when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus as our Lord and Savior - based on grace alone or do we need to do other things for God before we are saved?” We saw the elements of this debate began as soon as the church went beyond the Jews in Jerusalem. The first question was the relationship of the gospel to those that were not Jews. It was only partially answered in Acts 8 when Philip began to preach to the Samaritans followed by Peter and John coming and the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit. The wall of division that had separated Gentiles from the Jews was knocked down by the gospel, but the Samaritans were a mixture of Jewish and Gentile blood and they followed many Jewish practices. The next step is recorded in Acts 10 when Peter was preaching the gospel to Cornelius and those with him. Those Gentiles believed and received the Holy Spirit as well. When Peter returned to Jerusalem and the issue was discussed it was conceded by those that had opposed, that God had granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life. This was a huge step, but the issue of Gentile conversions had not yet been resolved because Cornelius was a Gentile who was already following some Jewish practices.

The question we face in our text for today is: “What about Gentiles who had no connection to the Jews?” That question is applicable to all of us here today. That question became critical following the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. We saw that last week in Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas faced strong opposition from disbelieving Jews resulting in opposition and persecution. But, nevertheless, a large number of Gentiles without experience with Judaism responded to the gospel. We ended last week with Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch, and in Acts 14:27-28 we read: *“When they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples.”*

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1

In these words we read that as the good news of Gentile conversions reach Jerusalem, there is a negative reaction by some of the Jewish Christians in Judea, which were of the sect of the Pharisees. In their eyes the conversion of Gentiles to Christianity was allowed, as long as it was seen as a sect of the Jewish faith - but outright conversion of Gentiles who did not keep the Jewish traditions, was not. These Jewish Christians of the Pharisee sect would have considered that kind of Christianity to be new a religion, and so they declared: *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*

This is a message that is very different from what those in Antioch had been taught and the gospel that Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed on their missionary journey. These Jews were not authorized by the church to go to Antioch to say these things, but they did so anyway. They believed in Jesus, but they also believed that the Laws of Moses had to be kept too. That is why they were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation. While we now understand this teaching is a serious heresy, this was an issue that was still unclear at that time to a lot of new followers of Jesus. Though they were ignorant in many ways of the teaching of Jesus, they were not ignorant of their heritage and traditions.

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” Acts 15:2-5

Here we read that while Paul and Barnabas put up a great fight against this false teaching, they could not get the issue resolved properly. The church in Antioch finally decided that the best way to resolve the issue was to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem - since that is where the argumentative men had come from and also gain the assistance of both the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church. This was a very wise decision because this was not just a local church problem, but one that would affect every church. What is the nature of salvation for the Gentiles, and therefore, for everyone, all of us?

Paul and Barnabas travel down to Jerusalem, but while going through Phoenicia and Samaria they tell those in the churches along the way about their missionary trip and the Gentiles that believed the gospel of Christ, which *“brought great joy”* in those churches. When they arrived in Jerusalem they met with the church along with the apostles and elders and reported to them what God had done – But the response in Jerusalem was very different from the response from they had received at the Gentile churches. While some may have been rejoicing as they were listening to this report, our text says other certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, raised opposition. They were critical instead of rejoicing. Their concern was that Gentiles needed to be circumcised to keep the Laws of Moses.

It is significant to note here that this time these men did not specifically demand circumcision *for salvation* as they did in verse 1. But rather they now required it in *“order them to keep the law of Moses.”*

What we see here is that their demand reveals that their concept of holiness had not yet been changed. They still thought of holiness as an outward conformity to the law rather than an inward change of heart that is brought about by the Holy Spirit. They did not yet understand the New Covenant and were still living under the concept of the Old Covenant in which holiness was an external code of conduct that separated them from all other people. In addition, the Pharisees twisted and added their own traditions to those laws. The issue here is not just circumcision, but all the Mosaic law and their traditions too.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Acts 15:6-11

The apostles and elders, along with Barnabas and Paul, and the believers of the party of the Pharisees which were concerned about this issue, gather together in Jerusalem, to consider the issues and divisions. Our text says there was *“much debate.”* The original Greek word for *“debate”* here is not about arguing, but about *“the searching out of a question or controversy.”* At the end of this discussion the apostle Peter summarized a conclusion by referencing his experience when God had him preach the gospel to Gentiles at the home of Cornelius, and that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as they themselves did on the day of Pentecost. He then concluded that 1) God does not disqualify Gentiles even though they do not meet the Mosaic law, 2) they should not put a burden upon the Gentiles that they themselves could not bear and 3) salvation is through faith in the grace of our Lord Jesus alone.

God’s Word tells us that we are not saved by what we do. Salvation by keeping God’s law is impossible. The purpose of God’s Law was never to save sinners, but to show sinners their desperate need for God’s grace. Ephesians 2:8-10 says: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”* The gospel is the good news, but it’s also the good news that divides – both in the world and in the church. Therefore unity in the church is wrong when it *compromises the truth* that salvation is by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone. We must be diligent to maintain Gospel unity!

And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, “‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.’ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” Acts 15:12-21

In these words we read that the force of Peter’s argument in verses 7-11 silenced even those who had disagreed, at least for the moment. Then Paul and Barnabas began to share how God had worked through them as they preached the gospel to the Gentiles, confirming their message with signs and wonders. Paul could have launched into a defense of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, as he does in Romans 3-4. But here his emphasis was on *what God had done through them*, so that their opponents would know that the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles *was all of God’s doing*. After Paul and Barnabas finished speaking, James, the half-brother of Jesus, who later wrote the Epistle of James, took the floor. James first calls attention to Peter’s speech concerning God’s work in the case of Cornelius. He then specifically points out the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12 which declared God’s promise of a future restoration of the nation of Israel which also included hope and restoration for the Gentiles.

In pointing this out James was reminding those at the Jerusalem Council that the Old Testament prophecies do not make additional demands on the Gentiles. James reasons that since Peter has shown that the Gentiles have been saved by grace alone, and since Amos shows Gentiles will not be required to become Jewish Christians in the future - then there is no reason to require them to be Jewish Christians in the present. James then gives his personal “*judgement*” that the Gentiles should not be troubled by having any Jewish laws imposed on them - and they should be careful of their conduct so as not to unnecessarily offend Jews faithful to Moses. And then James tells they can do so keeping the Jewish practice of abstaining from “*things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.*” James’ conclusion here was that the Gentile believers were to show respect to the Jews, even though they were not required to follow Mosaic law. We live in a day of much spiritual and moral compromise, even among evangelical Christians. For that reason, many of us abhor any thought of compromise. But we often see those who are strong in their convictions doing so even when it comes to trivial issues. Spiritual maturity requires discernment, so that we stand firm when it comes to essential truth. But, on matters not essential to the faith, where humble men and women may differ, we must elevate love over our rights. Concession is right when it does not compromise essential truth and it is done out of love to avoid offending others. But concession is always wrong when it compromises the essentials of the gospel unity of salvation by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” Acts 15:22-29

So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. Acts 15:30-35

As can be imagined, the congregation in Antioch “rejoiced” at the encouragement of the letter. Their salvation would no longer be questioned. They would not have to keep the Mosaic law to be accepted and saved, and the restrictions given were not law, but requests made to encourage harmony in the church among Jews and Gentiles. After “some time” Judas and Silas and whoever else may have been with them departed in peace and returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch where they taught the Word of God and preached the Gospel. Unity had been restored in the church..

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. Acts 15:36-41

Here we again see the principle of God that the gospel is the good news, but it’s also the good news that divides – both in the world and also in the church. The truth is, the greatest common sin of division in the church is *our relentless focus on ourselves* - rather than denying ourselves and taking up our crosses and following Jesus - and living out the Greatest Commandment to love God with all of our hearts, minds, souls and strength and loving one another and others. We see this in the conflict between two of the early church’s greatest leaders. Both had shown great spiritual maturity in the past. They had worked together for a number of years. Both had shown humility and deference to each other. Both were passionate about the issue that ultimately caused the conflict. Luke does not lay the blame on either Barnabas or Paul. Both were guilty of responding to the conflict in an ungodly manner. We know this because the phrase “sharp disagreement” in the Greek means “provoke and contentious.”

Both Barnabas and Paul wanted to return to the cities they had visited on their first missionary journey and encourage the churches. On that point they were agreed. But the dispute was over John Mark, Barnabas’ cousin. Paul did not want him to come because he had “deserted” them on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). While Scripture does not tell us the exact reason for his desertion, we find here that Paul viewed it as a very serious matter and Barnabas did not. That difference is in at least part to the two different personalities of these men. Barnabas still saw potential in John Mark and wanted to give him another chance and take him along. Paul saw John Mark’s previous actions as a failure that could compromise or at least hinder the planned mission. Who was right? The scripture doesn’t give us enough information to make a conclusion. As things normally are – probably both were partly right and partly wrong. Paul had valid reason to be concerned, but Barnabas also had proper insight to see the potential for John Mark who does later prove his usefulness to the cause of Jesus Christ in missions. The truth in all this is that the conflict itself was not really the issue. The fact that these two normally godly men were in such conflict shows that kind of conflict is common to all of us.

Here we also read that spiritual maturity does not erase personality differences. Such differences, if we're not careful, can lead to clashes that cause us to sin. Christian unity does not require that we all work closely, but rather calls us to share our lives and our hearts with each other. The Bible recognizes two kinds of unity. In Ephesians 4:3, Paul mentions the "*unity of the Spirit*" - which he says we must be *diligent to preserve*. This unity implies it is a spiritual fact, based on shared life in Jesus Christ. If a person has been born again into the body of Christ, then we are members of one another, and we must be careful not to damage that unity. Then, in verse 13, he mentions the "*unity of the faith*" which he says we are to *attain* to as we mature in Christ. This is the oneness of shared light regarding biblical truth. It is a fellowship that deepens as we mutually grow to understand and love the great truths of our faith.

We should not let personality clashes or difference of opinion to cause us to quit serving our Lord. The work of Christ is greater than any one of us, and we should keep on serving Him even if we've had a conflict with another Christian. Neither Paul nor Barnabas let this clash stop them from serving Jesus. They didn't leave the church. Instead of one missionary team, now in the providence of God, there were two. Also, we do not read, "Paul was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, telling all the churches how wrong Barnabas was." Rather, Paul went around "*strengthening the churches*" (15:41). There is no indication that Paul and Barnabas became rivals or competed with each other after this. Both men were committed to know Jesus Christ in a deeper way and to proclaim the gospel to every person. Every time after this, that Paul mentions Barnabas or Mark, he does so in a kind and supportive manner.

That being said, there are times when there are differences of viewpoint which require a separation. The will of God was that Barnabas should take Mark and go to Cyprus, because Cyprus, his birthplace, had not been visited since the churches there had been founded. And it was the will of God for Paul to take Silas and go into Syria and Cilicia, because the churches there needed his particular ministry. But it was not the will of God that they should be sharp in their contention. Their quarreling was not right. It was the will of God they separate; because it was not the will of God to quarrel. There are times when the Spirit of God does lead Christians to go separate ways. But they should do so with joy and with an agreeable understanding that the mind of the Spirit has been expressed in their divergent viewpoints. God sovereignly used the "*sharp disagreement*" between Barnabas and Paul for His own purposes, and the split that occurred at that time was not permanent. They did reconcile with one another and were able to work together again. We can trust our Lord Jesus to do the same when we humbly seek the "*unity of the Spirit*" and the "*unity of the faith*" together in our battle against the evil one who seeks to "steal, kill, and destroy" our unity in the Gospel. Followers of Jesus must be diligent to maintain Gospel unity and continue to humbly serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in spite of personality differences.

The Puritan Thomas Brooks once said: "Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous." Some years ago the superstar tenors Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti performed together in Los Angeles, California. A reporter tried to press the issue of competitiveness between the three men. "You have to put all of your concentration into opening your heart to the music," Domingo said. "You can't be rivals when you're making music together." That's can also true in the church. Unity in the church is wrong when it compromises the truth that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Concession is always wrong when it compromises the essentials of the gospel unity of salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Followers of Jesus in the church must be diligent to maintain Gospel unity and continue to humbly serve our Lord Jesus Christ in spite of personality differences. We must be diligent to maintain Gospel unity in the church. Let's not forget who our enemy is. For it is by grace alone that we all have been saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ. And none of us have done this. This is gift of God! Not a result of anything we have done - so that none of us may boast. For we are all God's workmanship. We were created in Christ Jesus to share the gospel. God has prepared us for this. I say let's get to work. Amen? Amen!