

For the Sake of Others' Faith

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- [0 : 0 0] It would be great if you could turn in your Bibles back to Acts chapter 15 as we continue our series through the Acts of the Apostles. So it's on page 1109.
- We all have to constantly make decisions in life, don't we? Whether big ones or little ones. And I wonder what shapes your decisions?
- What impacts how you decide one way or the other? For me, I must confess, it's whatever makes life easier. I mean, that's often how we decide, isn't it?
- Whatever makes life easier. But at the moment, I'm faced with another decision because my daughter has been bugging me for a dog. And she's been emailing me from school, hopefully through lunchtime, not her classes, but I'm constantly getting these emails with all these links to these dogs for sale.
- And the last one, the one that she's really keen on, is this one, Delta the dog. Isn't she cute? And she's actually, she's so keen that she's actually printed off more than 20 pictures of Delta the dog.
- [1 : 1 4] And she's put them all over the house, from my study desk to inside my sock drawer, so that when I open the drawer, whoa, there's Delta looking up at me. That's how keen she is.
- And yet, I know who'll end up having to walk Delta and feed her and pick up you-know-what from her. The parents.
- And so, what do I decide? How do I decide? What principles come into play? Well, today, we come to a passage where Paul makes some decisions.
- And as he does, we'll see a principle that he employs that can also help us in our own decisions. But before we get to that, let me remind you of the story so far.
- Ricky rightly reminded us last week that the key verse in Acts is from chapter 1, verse 8, where Jesus says to the apostles, you'll receive power and the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses.
- [2 : 1 3] And so, that was the day of Pentecost. Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. And they're moving outwards, Judea, then Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.
- And so, that's what we've seen in the book of Acts. Jerusalem is right down the bottom of Israel. And then you've got the region of Judea and then to the north, Samaria. And in chapters 13 to 14 of Acts, with Paul's first missionary journey, the gospel, the good news of Jesus, starts to go to the ends of the earth.
- It's certainly the ends as they knew it back then. And then last week, he's finished his first missionary journey. And we had a meeting, the council at Jerusalem, which will pop up again this week, actually.
- But we left last week, Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. Antioch was their base of operations, their sending church. And so, verse 35, just before our reading, it says, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

And so, today, Paul makes a decision to now go on a second missionary journey from Antioch, and a decision about whom he will take, or rather whom he will not take with him.

[3 : 35] For Paul wants reliable co-workers for the sake of others, which is point one, your outline, and verse 36 in your Bibles or on the screen. Verse 36, So, here's the decision.

Let's go back to visit the believers in all the towns we went to. But notice why he decides. It wasn't so he could have a holiday, or because he misses the food of those places, the dumplings in Derby, the lentils in Lystra.

I don't think either were there in either town. No, no, it's clearly for the sake of others, isn't it? He says he wants to see how the believers are doing. Here is a principle that helps him decide what is good for others.

And not so much for their physical good or even their emotional good, but actually for their spiritual good, which is why he refers to them as believers. In other words, Paul makes decisions for the sake of others' faith, their belief in Jesus.

But then comes a disagreement. Verse 37, So, here's the disagreement about who to take.

[5 : 19] Barnabas wants to take Mark, who is his cousin, Barnabas' cousin. But Paul does not want to take Mark. Why? Well, because Mark had deserted them before.

And so it seems that Paul does not want to put the mission of strengthening others' faith at risk. In other words, he wants to have reliable co-workers for the sake of others' faith.

Now, of course, you could say that Barnabas was also operating for the sake of others, namely Mark. He wanted to give his cousin a second chance, not so much to strengthen Mark's faith, but to encourage him.

After all, Barnabas' name means son of encouragement. But sadly, he and Paul couldn't agree. And so we go on to read in verse 39, that 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.

[6 : 26] And at this point, we want to know, you know, who was right? Was Barnabas or Paul right? In fact, I asked Mark Chu last Sunday night this very question, because Mark Chu from our evening congregation was preaching on this very same passage.

And so before the start of the service, I said to him, who do you think is right? You know, Barnabas or Paul? And as we were discussing it, we had a sharp disagreement.

He thought it was too hard to tell who was right, and I thought Paul was right to start with. Actually, it was a very friendly disagreement. He has not departed company from the staff team. He is still on the staff team. But the one between Paul and Barnabas wasn't friendly.

It was actually an argument. Which, by the by, just as an aside, these little kind of incidences are actually kind of evidence that the Bible is true.

Because the Bible, you know, shows its heroes warts and all, doesn't it? It doesn't shy away from the ups and downs of life. If it was all made up, it'd just be rosy, wouldn't it?

[7 : 34] But sadly, this happened. And it is sad when Christians have sharp disagreements. We have freedom to disagree on lots of things, actually. Lots of things that are not salvation or obedience issues.

Things like which footy team is the best, even which way to vote. But we should never let our disagreements become arguments. Paul and Barnabas could have agreed to disagree, couldn't they?

And still parted company happily. In one sense, that's what different denominations allow us to do today. Some Christians think adult baptism is the only way to go.

Some Christians think infant baptism is okay. And so you have the Baptist church and the Anglican church. That's okay. We can agree to disagree and part happily.

But at this point, it seems Paul and Barnabas part unhappily. And so I think at that point, Paul and Barnabas were both wrong, actually. Yet I do think Paul was right to start with about not taking Mark.

[8 : 41] Why? Because if you look at verse 40, Paul ends up being the one commended by the church. Paul chose Silas and left, and he was commended by the believers.

So clearly the believers at Antioch, the sending church, think Paul was right. And what's more, the mission succeeds in verse 41. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

That's what he went out to do, and it's happening. And in fact, Luke, who wrote Acts, never mentions Barnabas again, interestingly.

Now, for the record, Paul does not write off Mark. Sometimes Paul gets a bad rap. In fact, later on, he includes Mark as a co-worker.

In Colossians chapter 4, he says, Now, it seems like Mark has proven himself reliable, and Paul's trying to restore him back.

[9 : 50] And in 2 Timothy chapter 4, Paul actually says towards the end of his life, They're working together again.

Paul does not write off Mark completely. But at this point in Acts, Mark has proven himself unreliable, so Paul doesn't want to risk it for the sake of others' faith.

And we see this same principle at work in the next decision, where he removes a stumbling block or a barrier for the sake of others' faith. Point 2, chapter 16, verse 1.

So Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.

The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him, that is, Timothy along with him on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

[10 : 52] As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. Now the decisions reached in Jerusalem is what we saw last week, and there were two decisions.

And it was brought on by a situation, if you remember from last week, where certain people came and they were saying, look, unless you're circumcised, according to the law of Moses in the Old Testament, then you cannot be saved.

Now that's a huge call, isn't it? It's the difference between heaven and hell, isn't it? You cannot be saved unless you're circumcised.

But then we heard last week that the council met together and actually said, oh, hang on a second. No, no, verse 11. It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved.

It's by grace, not law. It's through grace or the gift of Jesus. For Jesus died to pay for our sins and to freely give us forgiveness and salvation from hell if we simply believe in him.

[12 : 06] I think I've shown you before the salvation equation, I think. Anyway, here it is. Faith in Jesus plus anything else, like circumcision, equals nothing.

Because if we add anything to the gospel, it's not the true gospel. It doesn't save. No, we're saved by faith in Jesus, grace alone. So faith in Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

Salvation. That's how it works. Our salvation is by grace, a gift that we receive by believing. And so can I ask at this point, do you believe in Jesus?

Or do you believe and are kind of trusting on some other things you do just to kind of make sure you're okay with God and we'll get into heaven? Because if you're doing faith in Jesus plus anything else, if you're relying on anything else, then that's not grace, is it?

We are to believe in Christ and Christ alone. And then in grateful response, we're to live his way, but not to get us saved in the first place.

[13 : 22] And so that was the first decision by the council last week, not to add anything to see people saved. No, no. If you want to be saved, you want to become a Christian, it's by believing Jesus only, not by circumcision.

But if that was their first decision, then why does Paul circumcise Timothy here in our passage today? Why? Why does he do that? That's what we saw in verses three, or verse three, didn't we?

Well, for starters, it's not actually to save him. Timothy is already saved. In verse one, Timothy was called a disciple, so he's already a Christian. So it wasn't to kind of save Timothy.

It wasn't for Timothy's sake. In fact, it would have been really painful for Timothy, let's be honest. It would have been really painful for Timothy to be circumcised. So it certainly wasn't for his sake.

Rather, verse three, it was for the sake of others, for the Jews in that area who knew Timothy's dad was not Jewish, but Greek, and so would not have circumcised his son, Tim.

[14 : 36] And for Jews in that area, knowing Timothy was not circumcised would have been a barrier, a stumbling block to listening to him preach the gospel.

It's a bit like what we saw with the second decision of the council last week. Do you remember? He says, we shouldn't add anything on them except tell them to avoid four things, food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, meat that's strangled, and from blood.

Those four things. Those four things have to do with temple worship. Food sacrifice to idols, sexual immorality with temple prostitutes, strangled animals, and blood from sacrifices, and so on.

They were all associated with temple worship. Now, of course, we as Christians are to avoid sexual immorality anyway, but Christians are free to eat anything.

And yet, they were asked not to, not because it saves them, but for the sake of the Jews because the law of Moses has been preached in every town from the earliest times.

[15 : 43] These Jews have grown up with the Old Testament law that told them not to eat those things. Again, it's the idea of not being a stumbling block to others.

I remember doing a mission with a church back in my 20s and it was during summer and I was asked to come and give a talk at this church on a Sunday and so during the week I met with the minister just to kind of sort out the details and I turned up because it was summer in board shorts, t-shirt, and flip-flops, you know, thongs.

And we were chatting away about things and at one point the minister gently said, now, you're not going to be dressed like that on Sunday, are you? And he was trying to be helpful and he said to me, look, this group of people will find that a barrier to listening to you.

They won't be able to take you seriously and they simply won't be able to listen to you because of your attire. And so it's like that here. Just like wearing board shorts and flip-flops to preach to a traditional group of people would have been a stumbling block for them, so also an uncircumcised Timothy preaching to a Jewish group of people would have been a stumbling block for them.

And so Paul removes any barriers, any stumbling blocks for the sake of others. And Timothy, despite the immense pain it would have caused him, goes along with it for the sake of others' faith.

[17 : 11] Do you see the principle that is operating in Paul's decisions here? In fact, he summarises it in 1 Corinthians 10. He says, And it's worth it because look at what happens in verse 5.

The churches were strengthened in the faith and the churches did grow daily in numbers. Here is Luke's summary statement that ends this section.

But notice the mission is successful. People are strengthened. The church does grow daily in numbers. And so the question for us this morning is, are our decisions influenced by what will help others' faith?

Or put differently, what are we willing to do for the sake of others' faith? Point three. What are we willing to do to both strengthen those who have faith and help bring others to faith?

Whether it's our kids or grandkids, friends or church family members. And even if, like Timothy, it involves some pain.

[18 : 35] Not circumcision, you understand, but some sort of pain. For example, I know of one family at church where their son desperately wanted not a dog like my daughter, but to play footy.

The problem was, footy was on Sunday mornings. And so the family knew that they would miss church. And so the parents decided, here was a decision, they decided to say no.

Even though it caused them pain because they saw their son really upset. And no parent likes seeing their kids upset. It did involve pain. But why did they decide that way?

Well, for the sake of their son's faith, you see. That he might come to kids' church and grow in Christ. Some other families who deliberately decide that they will come to church every Sunday they can, every Sunday they're able to, and not just when they're rostered on something.

Why? Well, they've told me, not just for them, but because they want to encourage others. They want to see others and ask after others. Here is the decision made for the sake of others' faith.

[19 : 44] Many of us might remember an older couple who used to come to this church, and they decided to take in a homeless young man for almost a year, even though they had their own Down syndrome son to care for.

I'm guessing many of you will know who I'm talking about. Now, that was a huge decision, wasn't it? Why did they do it? Well, for the sake of this young man's faith.

They wanted to bring him back to church every Sunday that he might become a Christian, and he did. I know of another who made decisions to give, just recently, a lady who made a decision to give a significant amount of money for ministry at this church.

I was kind of saying, you don't have to do this, you don't need to do this. But she was insistent, she said it's God's money, and she wanted to give it in a way that would be helpful for the sake of other people's faith.

I know of others who deliberately decide to look out for new people, to welcome them each Sunday. Why? Well, to encourage them in their own faith. And many others who serve in various ministries for the sake of others' faith.

[21 : 00] Even when serving can be frustrating because people leave things in a mess or don't appreciate your efforts, that causes us pain, and yet they're willing to put up with it for the sake of others' faith.

Now, it will look different for each of us depending on our own situation in life. Some of us can only do so much, but we can all pray, can't we? And we'll think about that more next week.

But the question again is what are we willing to do for the sake of others' faith? You know, will we attend, welcome, give, serve, pray as we are able?

Does the faith of others influence our decisions? I'm still not sure what I'll decide about Delta the dog. I do fear that she'll end up neglected because of our business, although if I'm really honest, I really simply don't want to pick up poo.

But if I knew that it would strengthen my daughter's faith, then I would get Delta tomorrow. Because we are to do what we can for the sake of others' faith.

[22 : 19] Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for these two short scenes from the book of Acts, these two little events recorded for us in history that show us an important principle to help make us make decisions in life.

And so we pray, Father, that you would help us to make decisions for the sake of others' faith. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.