

When to walk away

Sometimes resolution and healing cannot be reached. We believe that all things are possible with God's grace, but the human heart can close itself off from love and forgiveness and choose anger and brokenness. There comes a time when you have to walk away or, as a Christian psychologist friend counseled me, "You cannot resolve this pain, so it is necessary for your emotional and spiritual health to move on!" Today's scriptures illustrate two conflicts that would not be resolved.



Michael Olmsted

1 Samuel 26:17-25 is the tragic story of King Saul's hatred of David, shaped by jealousy, self-protection and entitlement. Since we are looking back to what was happening, we can easily diagnose the growth of crippling hatred in Saul's mind.

The beginning seems to go back to 1 Samuel 18 when Israel celebrated their victory over the Philistines. Women danced in the streets and sang: "Saul has killed his thousands.... David has killed his tens of thousands." Read the full story and note how David chose not to kill Saul on more than one occasion and even sought the advice of Jonathan, Saul's son and David's best friend.

Our text shows Saul seeming to repent of his hatred for David and offering reconciliation. Truthfully, there is no change in Saul, only deception and the desire to see David dead. David slips into Saul's tent one night and has opportunity to kill the sleeping king, but instead takes the king's spear and uses this to prove he has no desire to harm the king.

The next day Saul professes to

love David and seeks reconciliation, but he is lying once again. David realized that he can not heal the hatred in Saul's heart and the two never see one another again. Don't miss the obvious contrast of Saul's hatred and Jonathan's love and loyalty to David. The difference between father and son is what grows in the heart.

Acts 15:36-41 recounts another unresolved conflict between two significant biblical figures. Paul and Barnabas were bound together by a mutual love for God and for the lost pagan world. They had completed their first missionary journey to key cities of the Roman Empire, preaching the gospel and planting churches.

Now Paul wants to retrace their steps to check on those new churches, encourage their converts and expand the work of God. You would expect another epic account because these two men are deeply committed to Christ and share the same goal. It was Barnabas who first brought Paul to Antioch and vouched for him (Acts 11:25-26). But conflict can unfold even in good situations.

The falling out centers on a young man from Jerusalem, John Mark, who went with them on the first trip. John Mark had left them ("deserted," Acts 15:38) in Pamphylia on the first trip. The argument is so intense that Paul chose a new partner, Silas, and headed for Syria, while Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus. The comment has been made that this is the first "baptist" split recorded as a church planting strategy!

Even the best of us can become caught up in what we "know" is right and thinking the other person should admit to being wrong and apologize. Seriously, we can learn from this broken relationship that

Formations

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 26:17-25;
Acts 15:36-41

sometimes the best solution is to walk away and focus on doing the right thing no matter what someone else does.

Understanding that a conflict will not be resolved and choosing to walk away is never easy. After careful self-examination and prayer, you may understand that "getting along" and pretending the problem is not real will only result in more problems for you and others. You can expend a great deal of energy and waste valuable time instead of moving on to something positive and beneficial. You may feel a failure, but you stand a better chance of serving God rather than reinforcing damaging conflict.

Even unresolved conflict can result in good by God's grace. John Mark reappears in one of Paul's last letters, 2 Timothy 4:11, where Paul requests, "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service" (NAS). Was it a softening of Paul's heart, the healing of time, a change in a young man's life that healed a broken relationship? We do not know. Were Paul and Barnabas reconciled? We must remember that sometimes only a miracle of God's grace can heal and restore our broken relationships.

Sometimes you have to walk away from a conflicted relationship when you realize you cannot make it right and to keep on will only bring deeper pain and even hurt others. You have to trust God and the power of his grace.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.