

Acts 15.1-21

¹Some people came from Judea and started teaching the Lord's followers that they could not be saved, unless they were circumcised as Moses had taught. ²This caused trouble, and Paul and Barnabas argued with them about this teaching. So it was decided to send Paul and Barnabas and a few others to Jerusalem to discuss this problem with the apostles and the church leaders.

The Church Leaders Meet in Jerusalem

³The men who were sent by the church went through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling how the Gentiles had turned to God. This news made the Lord's followers very happy. ⁴When the men arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, including the apostles and the leaders. They told them everything God had helped them do. ⁵But some Pharisees had become followers of the Lord. They stood up and said, "Gentiles who have faith in the Lord must be circumcised and told to obey the Law of Moses." ⁶The apostles and church leaders met to discuss this problem about Gentiles. ⁷They had talked it over for a long time, when Peter got up and said:

My friends, you know that God decided long ago to let me be the one from your group to preach the good news to the Gentiles. God did this so that they would hear and obey him. ⁸He knows what is in everyone's heart. And he showed that he had chosen the Gentiles, when he gave them the Holy Spirit, just as he had given his Spirit to us. ⁹God treated them in the same way that he treated us. They put their faith in him, and he made their hearts pure. ¹⁰Now why are you trying to make God angry by placing a heavy burden on these followers? This burden was too heavy for us or our ancestors. ¹¹But our Lord Jesus was kind to us, and we are saved by faith in him, just as the Gentiles are.

¹²Everyone kept quiet and listened as Barnabas and Paul told how God had given them the power to work a lot of miracles and wonders for the Gentiles. ¹³After they had finished speaking, James ^[a] said: My friends, listen to me! ¹⁴Simon Peter ^[b] has told how God first came to the Gentiles and made some of them his own people. ¹⁵This agrees with what the prophets wrote, ¹⁶"I, the Lord, will return and rebuild David's fallen house. I will build it from its ruins and set it up again. ¹⁷Then other nations will turn to me and be my chosen ones. I, the Lord, say this. ¹⁸I promised it long ago."

¹⁹And so, my friends, I don't think we should place burdens on the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰We should simply write and tell them not to eat anything that has been offered to idols. They should be told not to eat the meat of any animal that has been strangled or that still has blood in it. They must also not commit any terrible sexual sins. ^[c]²¹We must remember that the Law of Moses has been preached in city after city for many years, and every Sabbath it is read when we Jews meet.

The dispute between the men from Judea and Paul and Barnabas.(1) The men from Judea state their case.

1. And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
2. Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." These Jewish Christians (often called "Judaizers") taught that Gentiles may become Christians, but only after first becoming Jews, and submitting to all Jewish rituals, including circumcision.
3. It was very difficult for some Jewish Christians to accept that Gentiles could be brought into the church as "equal partners" without first coming through the law of Moses. "It was one thing to accept the occasional God-fearer into the church, someone already in sympathy with Jewish ways; it was quite another to welcome large numbers of Gentiles who had no regard for the law and no intention of keeping it." (Williams)
4. These Christians were from Judea, and were not content to keep their beliefs to themselves, but felt compelled to persuade other Christians. They taught the brethren, coming all the way to Antioch to preach this message.
5. By their teaching, these certain men from Judea were passing a negative judgment on all of Paul and Barnabas' missionary endeavors. On their recent missionary journey, they had founded churches among the Gentiles without bringing them under the Law of Moses. These certain men from Judea said Paul and Barnabas were all wrong!
6. When in the city of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul preached this message: *And by Him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses* (Acts 13:39). These certain men . . . down from Judea would have objected, saying "Jesus saves us, but only after we have done all we can do to keep the Law of Moses." But Paul taught a man could only be right with God on the basis of what Jesus had done!
7. You cannot be saved: This was not a side issue; it had to do with salvation itself. This was not a matter where there could be disagreement among believers, with some believing you must be under the law, and some believing it wasn't important. This was an issue that went to the core of Christianity, and it had to be resolved.
8. We can just imagine how Satan wanted to take advantage of this situation. First, he wanted the false doctrine of works righteousness to succeed. But even if it didn't, Satan wanted a costly, bitter doctrinal war to complete split and sour the church. This may be the greatest threat to the work of the gospel seen in the Book of Acts!

(2-4) Paul and Barnabas respond to the teaching of the men from Judea.

9. Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.
10. Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them: Their first response was to persuade. We can imagine there was no small dissension and dispute with them indeed. These two who had seen God work so powerfully through the Gentiles would not abandon that work easily.
11. In this, Paul and Barnabas show the hearts of true shepherds: To confront and dispute with those who insist on promoting false doctrines in the church.
12. They determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem: When persuasion did not end the issue, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to have the matter settled by the apostles and elders. They couldn't just agree to disagree on this issue, because it was at the core of what meant to be a follower of Jesus.
13. Who are the they who determined that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem to determine this question? It seems to speak of the church collectively in Antioch, where this false doctrine was being promoted. This is indicated by the statement that they were sent on their way by the church.
14. They caused great joy to all the brethren: As Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, they found plenty of other Christians who rejoiced at what God had done among the Gentiles. This is in contrast to the certain men from Judea.

(5) The men from Judea re-state their teaching.

15. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."
16. Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up: We see that many of these Judaizers were Christians who had been Pharisees. The Pharisees were renowned for their high regard for the law, and their scrupulous observance of the law.
17. If the Pharisees believed anything, they believed one could be justified before God by keeping the law. For a Pharisee to really be a Christian, it would take more than an acknowledgment that Jesus was Messiah; he would have to forsake his attempts to justify himself by the keeping of the law and accept the work of Jesus as the basis of his justification.
18. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas would not allow the pagans to merely "add" Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. The commanded that they had to turn from their vain gods to the true God (Acts 14:14-15). These Pharisees who had become Christians must do the same thing: Turn from their efforts to earn their way before God by keeping the law, and look to Jesus. You can't just "add" Jesus and now say "Jesus helps me to justify myself through keeping the law."
19. Paul himself was a former Pharisee (Philippians 3:5) who became a Christian. But he knew that Jesus didn't help him do what a Pharisee did, only better. He knew that Jesus *was* his salvation, not *the way* to his salvation. Paul wrote: *knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.* (Galatians 2:16)
20. It is necessary or circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses: These former Pharisees were teaching two things. First, Gentile converts must be *initiated* into Judaism through circumcision. Second, that Gentile converts must *live under* the law of Moses if they are to be saved, and embraced into the Christian community.
21. Basically, their teaching was: "Gentiles are free to come to Jesus. We welcome them and want them to come to Jesus. But they have to come through the Law of Moses in order to come to Jesus. Paul and Barnabas, among others, have been allowing Gentiles to come to Jesus without first coming through the Law of Moses."
22. We can imagine how they would have even made a case from the Old Testament for this teaching. They might have said Israel has *always* been God's chosen people and that Gentiles must become part of Israel if they want to be part of God's people.
23. Passages the Pharisees who believed might quote in defense of their position are Exodus 12:48-49 and Isaiah 56:6. These passages might be quoted to say that the covenant the Gentiles were invited to join was a covenant of circumcision.

The Jerusalem council. (6-11) In the midst of a great dispute, the apostle Peter speaks to the issue.

24. Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."
25. Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. Here, we see the church coming together to decide the issue. They didn't just let the issue sit, nor leave it up to the conscience of each believer.

26. The question raised by the Jerusalem council was immense: Are Christians saved by faith alone, or by a *combination* of faith and obedience of the Law of Moses? Is the work of Jesus by itself enough to save the one who trusts in Jesus, or must we add our work to Jesus' work in order to be saved?
27. With significant doctrinal issues today, perhaps this sort of public "trial" of doctrine would be beneficial.
28. And when there had been much dispute: This would have been amazing to see! Christians serious enough about the truth to dispute for it! In the midst of this, Peter, as one of the leading apostles, rose up to make his opinion known on the matter.
29. Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago: Peter begins with a history lesson, recounting the work God had already done. He then makes the point that God had fully received the Gentiles apart from their being circumcised (God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us). If God had acknowledged these Gentiles as full partners in His work, they why shouldn't the church? If God received them, so should the church!
30. In saying, "Made no distinction between us and them," Peter makes an important observation. It comes straight from his vision of the clean and unclean animals, from which God taught him this principle: *God has shown to me that I should not call any man common or unclean* (Acts 10:28). Those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed thought that the Gentiles were inherently "common" (in the sense of "unholy") or "unclean," and had to be made holy and clean by submitting to the Law of Moses.
31. Purifying their hearts by faith. Peter shows *how* the heart is purified: by faith, not by keeping of the law. If they were purified by faith, then there was no need to be purified by submitted to ceremonies found in the Law of Moses.
32. Christians are not only *saved* by faith; they are *purified* by faith also!
33. Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? Peter wisely answers another objection. One might ask, "What is the *harm* in bringing Gentiles under the Law of Moses?" Peter was right on the mark when he observed that the law was a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.
34. This is demonstrated by a brief look at Israel's history. At the birth of the nation at Mount Sinai, they broke the law by worshipping the golden calf. At the end of Old Testament history, they are still breaking the law by breaking the Sabbath and marrying pagan women (Nehemiah 13). From beginning to end, Israel could not bear the yoke of the law.
35. Those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed were making a critical mistake. They were looking at Israel's history under the law with eyes of nostalgia, not truth. If they would have carefully and truthfully considered Israel's failure under the law, they would not have been so quick to put Gentiles under the law also.
36. Paul makes the same argument in the book of Galatians 3:2-3. If the law does not save us, why would we return to it as the principle by which we live? In light of the finished work of Jesus, it is offensive to God to go back to the law. This is why Peter asked, "why do you test God?"
37. But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they. Peter concludes with the observation that it is through grace that all are saved - both Jew and Gentile - and not by obedience to the law. If we are saved by grace, then we are not saved by grace *and* law-keeping.
38. Peter also insists there is only one way of salvation: We [Jews] shall be saved in the same manner as they [Gentiles]. Jewish Christians were not saved, even in part, by their law-keeping; they were saved the same way Gentiles were: Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(12) Paul and Barnabas tell of their work among the Gentiles, supporting Peter's claim that God is doing a work among them.

39. Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.
40. Then all the multitude kept silent and listened: This shows that even though *there had been much dispute*, these men were all of an honorable heart. They were willing to listen, and to be persuaded if wrong.
41. Declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles: Barnabas and Paul confirm Peter's previous point. Essentially, they are saying "God has accepted the Gentiles, should not we as well?"

(13-21) James, the brother of Jesus, speaks to the issue, supporting what Peter and Paul had said.

42. And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of 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 will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things.' Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."
43. James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me." This James is not the apostle James, whose martyrdom is recorded in Acts 12:2. This is the one traditionally known as James the Just - the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:155), brother of Jude (Jude 1), author of the book of James (James 1:1).

44. God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people: James begins by insisting God had a people among the Gentiles. This would astound a religious Jew in that day!
45. The Greek word for Gentiles (it could also be translated *nations*) is *ethne*. The Greek word for people in this passage is *laos*. The Jews considered themselves a *laos* of God, and never among the *ethne*. For them *ethne* and *laos* were contrasting words. So, it would be challenging for them to hear that God at the first visited the Gentiles (*ethne*) to take out of them a people (*laos*).
46. "The paradox inherent in the contrast between *Gentiles* (or *nations*) and *people* is striking, since the latter term was often used of the Jews as the people of God in contrast to the Gentiles. Now it is being urged that God's people includes the Gentiles." (Marshall)
47. With this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: James will judge this new work of God by the way any work of God should be judged. James will look to what is written.
48. Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name: In this passage James quotes (Amos 9:11-12), it actually says that salvation will come to the Gentiles. This demonstrates that what God is doing among the Gentiles has a *Biblical* foundation.
49. Today, many things are considered *Biblical* if they merely fail to contradict something in the Word, even though they may have no root in the Word of God whatsoever. An outside authority would settle this debate. The outside authority was God's Word.
50. "Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture." (Stott)
51. I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down: When James quotes the prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 about rebuilding the fallen tabernacle of David, he remembers that the Judaism of his day had fallen down in the sense that it had rejected its Messiah. Now God wants to rebuild that work, focusing on a church made up of both Jew and Gentile.
52. All the Gentiles who are called by My name: When God says there are Gentiles who are called by His name, He is saying they stay Gentiles. They are not Gentiles who have been made Jews. Therefore, Gentiles do not need to become Jews and under the law to be saved!
53. Therefore I judge implies that James had a position of high authority in the church. He was probably respected as the "senior pastor" of the church at Jerusalem.
54. The Greek presents it even more strongly as "I determine" or "I resolve" (Expositor's). In addition, when the decision of James was published, it was presented as the mutual decision of all present (Acts 15:25: *It seemed good to us*). Clearly, James' leadership was supported by all present.
55. "The rest either *argued* on the subject, or gave their *opinion*; James alone pronounced the *definitive sentence*." (Clarke)
56. What did James decide? We should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God. James essentially says, "Let them alone. They are turning to God, and we should not trouble them." At the bottom line, James decided that Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were correct, and that those *of the sect of the Pharisees who believed* were wrong.
57. But that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood: James' decision that Gentile believers should not be under the Mosaic Law is also tempered by practical instruction. The idea was that it was important that Gentile believers not act in a way that would antagonize the Jewish community in every city and destroy the church's witness among Jews.
58. If the decision is that one does not have to be Jewish to be a Christian, it must also be declared that one does not need to forsake the Law of Moses to be a Christian.
59. To abstain from things polluted by idols . . . from things strangled, and from blood: These three commands have to do with the eating habits of Gentile Christians. Though they were not bound under the Law of Moses, they were bound under the Law of Love. The Law of Love tells them, "don't unnecessarily antagonize your Jewish neighbors, both in and out of the church."
60. To abstain from . . . sexual immorality: When James declares that they forbid the Gentile Christians to abstain from . . . sexual immorality, we shouldn't think that it means common sex outside of marriage, which all Christians (Jew or Gentile) recognized as wrong. Instead, James is directing these Gentiles living in such close fellowship with the Jewish believers to observe the specific marriage regulations required by Leviticus 18, which prohibited marriages between most family relations. This was something that Jews would abhor, but most Gentiles would think little of.
61. Gentile Christians had the "right" to eat meat sacrificed to idols, to continue their marriage practices, and to eat food without a kosher blessing, because these were aspects of the Mosaic law they definitely were not under. However, they are encouraged (demanded?) to law down their "rights" in these matters as a display of love to their Jewish brethren.
62. "All four of the requested abstentions related to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17 and 18, and three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals." (Stott)

APPLICATION

- **What specifically was God saying to me to this evening?**
- **What specific adjustments will I make in my life as a result of God's Word to me?**