

## **THE GOSPEL**

### Acts 15:7-9, 22-31

I remember growing up in a time when some people thought that a person could not be a Christian and go to the movie theater, that Christian women could not wear makeup or have short hair, that being saved was a result of what we do and don't do. The concept of what is "acceptable moral behavior" has changed considerably in the last 50 years, but many still have the idea that salvation is something that we earn by living a good moral life (the definition of which changes each year), being fair with other people (however you define that) and believing that there is a God (or as some are likely to state it, "a higher power"). The concept of Christianity as a code regulating actions borders on legalism and trying to live our lives according to the "knowledge of good and evil." It is superficial at best and denies the sufficiency of Christ's work to redeem us. Such ideas are completely contrary to the Gospel message and are very much like the error that some Jewish Christians tried to interject into the practices of the early church.

Old habits are hard to break and old paradigms (the way we think about things) are even harder to get rid of. People have a lot of erroneous notions about how things work and it is difficult to avoid thinking in certain ways about things once they have been put into your mind, especially when these ideas are introduced at an early age.

Those Jewish Christians who had been raised in a very orthodox environment (especially the Pharisees) were taught from the earliest times about the origin of circumcision and how important it was for the Jews. They could not imagine anyone being pleasing to God who had not been circumcised. We can argue that all the laws of Moses had good reasons for being given to the people. Many of the hygiene practices are right in line with what modern day medicine has discovered. However, to make these a requirement for salvation misses the point of the grace of God and the fact that salvation is so costly and precious that it cannot be earned.

Paul and Barnabas recognized the error of such teaching and they saw that it would be a serious impediment to the spread of the Gospel. If the Jewish laws were imposed on the grace of God, then Christianity would be nothing more than a sect of Judaism. They wasted no time in refuting the teaching. Of course, they did not change the minds of those who were teaching the error and it became necessary to get a ruling from the church leaders in Jerusalem.

Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem and met initially with the church along with the Apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem and reported to them what God was doing among the Gentiles as a result of the missionary trip they had taken. As they shared the message of what God was doing through their ministry – Gentiles were being added to the church, the Pharisees in the church challenged the authenticity of what had been happening since these Gentiles had not been circumcised nor were they following the law of Moses. This controversy was the very reason that Paul and Barnabas had come to Jerusalem. This challenge prompted another meeting with just the Apostles and elders.

#### Requirements for Gentiles – 15:7-9

<sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; <sup>9</sup> and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Acts 15:7-9 (NASB95)

This meeting in Jerusalem occurred about nineteen years after the Resurrection and many (most) of the Jewish believers in Christ were still following the procedures and practices of

Judaism. It is likely that many in the church at Jerusalem agreed with the position of the outspoken Pharisees regarding Gentiles Christians. With the background of those discussing the matter, it is not surprising there was “much debate.”

Conflict can be constructive or destructive depending on how it is handled. The two groups could have each taken the stance that they were right and that they would not listen to the other side and that approach would have caused a split in the early church. The matter was brought before a council of the church leaders and the two sides argued back and forth. After hearing what the arguments were, Peter then stood up to give his thoughts on the matter. He had seen that the very first Gentiles were saved without any other requirements except that they believed God and trusted Him. The conversion experience of Cornelius and his family was just like what Peter and the other disciples had experienced. God had given them the Holy Spirit in the same way that he did for the Jews who believed. It was evident that God had not set up any special requirements for salvation when He saved Cornelius. That same grace would work for the Jews as well as for the Gentiles.

Notice the words of verse eight where Simon Peter said that the Lord accepted Cornelius and his household on the basis of what was in their hearts without any reference to Jewish rituals or practices. The affirmation was evidenced by these Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit in the same way the Jewish believers had on the Day of Pentecost following the Resurrection of Jesus. The message to the Judaizers was that they were essentially saying that God had made a mistake about ten years ago and apparently had repeated the mistake in what had just happened among the Gentiles that believed Barnabas and Paul.

Peter concluded his discourse with a statement that was a not-so-subtle message to these legalists that Jews were saved in the same way that God saves non-Jews and that is by grace through faith and nothing else. It is not surprising that after Peter finished that no one said anything as we see in verse twelve: “and all the people kept silent.” It is amazing what facts will do to resolve arguments!

Those church leaders who had argued that keeping of all the Jewish law was necessary for salvation realized that they had been ignoring the facts of what God had already done. They were saying one thing and the clear evidence was something else. Now the council was ready to listen to what had been happening among the Gentiles by the missionary team that God had ordained out of the church at Antioch.

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own agendas of “what we want to see” that we might be missing “what God is doing.” Great things were happening in the kingdom of God which was in direct contradiction to the paradigm that the Pharisees had and they could have missed it. We need to be careful that we do not miss what God is doing today by concentrating on trivial issues rather than the Good News that we are saved by grace through faith.

Barnabas and Paul then were given another opportunity to share what had happened on their visits to various cities and then James the overseer of the church at Jerusalem summed up the conclusions and tied in Old Testament references from Amos to give additional validity to the decision that the group had reached. From the reference in Amos, we see that it was God’s intent to include all mankind in the group referred to as “a people called by My Name.”

Since the church at Antioch had asked the Apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem for help in dealing with this difficult question, James responded with a formal letter that would be sent to them and would be accompanied by two witnesses from the Jerusalem church who would attest to the validity of the message.

### Clear Expectation – 15:22-26

<sup>22</sup> Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, <sup>23</sup> and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. <sup>24</sup> “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, <sup>25</sup> it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, <sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 15:24–26 (NASB95)

The letter that James wrote was typical of what we see of his writings in his general letter to the “twelve tribes” which likely meant all of Israel: it was terse and to the point without mincing words. The first part of the letter was an open rebuke of those Judaizers who went from Jerusalem to Antioch to tell them their opinion about the necessity of keeping all the points of the law before the Gentiles could be saved. James clearly stated “we did not authorize what they did.”

James then went on to assure the church at Antioch that the leaders in the church in Jerusalem were in agreement with the information they were about to receive from those who were carrying the letter from him. James was very direct in affirming Barnabas and Paul for their unselfish work that had put them at risk of losing their lives.

He was very thorough in that he named the two members who were the witnesses of the proceeding and the resulting proclamations that were contained in the letter. It is somewhat subtle that one of these two witnesses was a Hebrew Jew (Judas) and the other one (Silas) was a Hellenistic Jew and a Roman citizen. This showed a sensitivity to the various backgrounds of the people to whom the letter was intended in Antioch and other places that had more diversity than the Jerusalem church.

### Believers Rejoice – 15:27-31

<sup>27</sup> “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup> “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: <sup>29</sup> that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.” <sup>30</sup> So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. <sup>31</sup> When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. Acts 15:27–31 (NASB95)

It seems somewhat surprising that no mention was made that the Jerusalem church in all their meetings and deliberations had set aside a time for prayer. Perhaps it could be assumed that they did just that. We do see mention in James’ letter that they had agreement from the Holy Spirit in what they decided to do. That statement could possibly mean that someone in the church was given a message from the Holy Spirit affirming the decision of the leaders.

There were four items mentioned as necessary requirements and these could be divided into two parts – a doctrinal part related to expectations of those who are saved and a practical part related to our relationship with others in the church.

The major doctrinal issue was addressed in the decision that no other requirement such as following Jewish practices should be added to the clear message that everyone who is saved is saved by grace through faith in the completed work of the Lord Jesus. The Gentile believers were coming from cultural and religious backgrounds that were polytheistic and recognized “other gods.” This paganism was so totally antithetical to the identity of God the Father of the Lord Jesus that association with anything that was remotely related to pagan gods and idols was to be avoided. The separation was to include not even eating food that had been dedicated or sacrificed to idols.

Failure to have a sharp line of separation from paganism was one of the contributing

factors to the problems that the ancient nation of Israel had for much of its history. As Christians, making a sharp distinction would keep them (and us) from adopting pagan traditions that would dilute the purity of the gospel message. A general principle that we might take away from this “requirement” is that Christians do not need to be participating in cultural and traditional practices that have their origin in paganism. What part of “come ye out from among them and be ye separate” do we not understand?

The culture of that day in most of the then-known world with regard to sexual activity was somewhat like it is today in that there did not seem to be any boundaries and limits regarding acceptable behavior. We have come up with a lot of euphemisms such as premarital relations, casual sex, and living together for the terrible sounding word that James used in his letter. Today, James would be accused of “hate speech” if he used the word fornication instead of these euphemisms.

We notice that James did not include requirements to not steal, not murder, not lie, and not commit adultery since even these pagan cultures generally accepted that such practices were wrong and would lead to the eventual demise of a nation.

Where are we today in our culture? It almost seems that stealing, lying, and character assassinations (that Jesus said was like murder) are common practices and most of us seem to think that there is nothing that we can do to stop it. This list doesn’t even mention the perverted ideas that we are being told are things that we should not only tolerate but never even mention in negative terms. Many become incensed at the idea of “locker room talk” being done by those in leadership positions but think it is perfectly OK for others leaders to be openly gay. This is what happens when secular ideas replace Godly principles in a society.

The other two “requirements” in James’ letter have been categorized by Warren Wiersbe as “personal concessions” rather than commandments such as we might call the previous remarks to avoid idolatry and immorality. The concessions were practical considerations given that the church had people from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds and that fellowship in the church would likely involve sharing food with one another. As we know, the Jews still have many restrictions regarding foods that are considered acceptable.

Even before the “Mosaic law” was given regarding what was edible and what were the acceptable ways of preparing even edible foods, God had given people restrictions regarding consumption of blood and how to prepare meat that was to be consumed. Parts of these restrictions were based on health concerns and parts based on spiritual implications. If a person wanted to drink the blood of bulls so that they would take on the character and strength of the animal from which the blood came, then that would be wrong. From a health standpoint, serious problems and transmission of diseases could result from consumption of animal blood.

The stipulation to avoid eating “things strangled” is very much a health concern. The word “strangled” could also be rendered “suffocated” or simply that the animal had “stopped breathing.” In other words, we should not be eating an animal that had died of “natural causes” and we should not be eating “road kill.”

It is not, at all, surprising that the letter from James was well received by the church at Antioch. The good news of salvation being based on God’s grace and accessed by faith and not works would have become just “news” if the Old Testament requirements were conditions for being saved. Christ had fulfilled all the requirements of the Law and “in Him” we have satisfied all the provisions to which the Law pointed. By requiring people to practice those provisions is to deny the effectiveness and sufficiency of what God did in Christ to bring salvation to all who put their trust in Him.