

Lesson 23: Acts 15:22-16:5 The Jerusalem Council – 2nd Question

Introduction

The Jerusalem Council of 59 AD convened in response to a serious threat to the first question of Covenant. The challenge was an internal one. It had to do with the application of Old Covenant Law to New Covenant believers. And since many Jewish believers continued to keep the major Old Covenant requirements as a matter of cultural heritage, the focus of the challenge was on Gentiles and those who witnessed to Gentiles. Conservative Jewish Christians visiting the church in Antioch, a base of Christian outreach, made this claim, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

That’s a first question claim. It has to do with our justification before God. “What makes me acceptable or righteous enough to be in a covenant relationship with holy God?” Paul and Barnabas became indignant at this addition to the Gospel of grace. Luke’s report of the Council has Peter giving refutation to this claim.

¹⁰ “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

Peter and Paul are in agreement that to be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus means that no other requirements can be tacked on to grace. James the elder goes on to back them up with a quotation from Amos that includes short references to Jeremiah and Isaiah. Essentially, he is saying, “The prophets agree. Gentiles are accepted as Gentiles. They don’t have to become Jews.” One of the really knew things about the New Covenant is that the people of God are no longer taken out from among the nations and included into the one specific ethnic group: Israel. Now, the people of God are made up of believers from all the various ethnic groups, whether Lycaonian, Persian or Roman, Libyan or Egyptian, Han, Zulu, Polish, Irish, Korean, Bengali, all are accepted into the New Covenant family through faith in Jesus Christ. Old Covenant Law produced an ethnic people of God with a shared culture. The New Covenant produces a spiritual renewed people of God full of ethnic diversity. Ethnic identity is retained in John’s vision of Heaven, Revelation 7:9-10,

“...a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches *were* in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

The Apostles and elders in Jerusalem agree that Jew and Gentile are saved through grace by faith. And then James goes on to make this suggestion.

¹⁹ “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹ For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

When we first read this, we might wonder whether James is slyly agreeing with the conservative party who claimed, not only was circumcision necessary, but missionaries to Gentiles must also “direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” Did James just agree with Peter and then also agree with the opposition? What’s up with these commandments?

Well, if he did, Peter and Paul and Barnabas do not seem to have noticed. We are told the Apostles, and elders, and the whole gathered church agree to send men out to Gentile churches, reassuring them that salvation is by grace and instructing them to do the things James recommended.

There is both an affirmation of grace and a call to a particular kind of obedience. We need to unravel this a bit to make sure we understand what is going on. The remaining two reports of Acts Part IV are

going to cause us to think about the role of obedience in our salvation. We will start by considering the letter that was sent out by the Council, and then we will look at a couple of surprising things that happen as Paul sets out to strengthen the Galatian churches. First, the letter, Acts 15:22-35.

The Letter (15:22-35)

²² 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, ²³ 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. ²⁴ “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, ²⁵ it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word *of mouth*. ²⁸ “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ 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.”

³⁰ So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. ³³ After they had spent time *there*, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. ³⁴ But it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.”

We might consider this letter the shortest of the New Testament letters. Even though it is encased in another New Testament book, it is a letter, containing senders, and receivers, and a message. However, the suggestion that we should take the content as inspired truth is easily debatable. When someone speaks in the Bible, the Bible remains without error if it communicates accurately the speech. It is another question whether or not the Bible is indicating to us that the speech is true. Another example of a letter inside of Acts, is the letter of the Roman tribune in Acts 23, who had written to Felix. We believe that Luke reported the letter correctly. The Bible is without error in telling us what was said, but we know that Lysias was not telling the exact truth in the letter. There is falsehood in the letter. He intentionally misled Felix.

The letter does claim the leading of the Holy Spirit. At least the elders and Apostles are saying, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and it seemed good to us to write this to you.” So maybe we are to take it as inspired. I take the content as a wise, Spirit-filled response to a particular situation, but not as normative command for all Gentiles in all places. We will get to that content in a minute and why I think that. First, the senders and the receivers.

The senders of the letter are the Apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem, who also claim to have the agreement of the whole Church. And we do not know to what level the whole Church agrees. There may be some of the circumcision party who are agreeing to disagree. They are not going to oppose the decision publicly. But there’s always people still processing after you have such a big gathering. Importantly, there is no division among the leadership, concerning the decision of the Council. A decision has been made by all the Apostles and elders to which the Church assents.

The receivers identified in the letter are not all Gentiles everywhere, but the brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The Apostles and elders specifically address those churches affected by teachers who had gone out from Jerusalem. They write,

“Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The leaders in Jerusalem are taking responsibility to correct the false teaching that has been attached to the church they lead. They do not address the letter to churches further into Asia Minor that Paul and Barnabas planted. Though later, we will read that Paul communicates these decrees to the churches in Galatia with the encouragement that they observe them. Paul is on board with the intent of this letter, showing his agreement by applying the letter in his particular sphere of influence.

Interestingly, the theological decision of the council regarding salvation is not expressed in the letter. And that seems like a significant omission. They don't say, “We have decided that you can be saved without circumcision.” They don't say that. The Apostles and elders are comfortable trusting Paul and Barnabas to communicate what has been agreed about the Gospel. It's the Gospel they've been preaching anyway. And I imagine that the lack of Gospel clarification would communicate to the church in Antioch trust. Jerusalem trusts Paul and Barnabas, and the teachers and prophets in Antioch to continue preaching the Gospel as they have been preaching it. Jerusalem does not feel the need to correct them or exert oversight. Paul and Barnabas and the elders in Antioch can fill that role. Judas and Silas are sent along to confirm the Apostles' and elders' agreement with Paul and Barnabas. They are tried, attested men. They are valued leaders in the Jerusalem church. But they do not seem to carry the weight of oversight. They come to affirm, not exert authority. We are not going to hear anything more about this Judas after this reference. Silas is going to become a team member with Paul on his next missionary journey, where Paul is clearly going to be the leader of the team.

Four Commands Recommended by James

So, what are these decrees that Paul has agreed to tell Gentiles to obey?

²⁸ “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ 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.”

What stands out to me first is what James did not suggest. What is missing to this list? What is he not encouraging? Circumcision, food laws, ceremonial cleansing, Sabbath observance, none of the major markers of Old Covenant Law are included in the list. And that's curious. And that affirms the most critical question about this list. Is this a backhanded way of agreeing with the circumcision party that Gentiles must observe the Law of Moses in order to be saved? No. Or at least no good Jew would think that. No good Jew would read this list and think that this is a summary statement of the Law. What they would see immediately is what is not there, especially that circumcision is left off.

Recognizing what is left off helps us answer the most critical question about James' list. The most critical question is whether James' instructions are intended as an answer to the first question of Covenant, “How am I declared righteous before God? Or acceptable to God?” or as an answer to the second question of Covenant, “How then shall I live?” What are we talking about, first question or second question? The Council affirmed the Gospel answer to the first question: by grace through faith you are declared righteous, made acceptable. This is not a first question issue. This is a second question issue. James is considering the question, “Knowing we are made acceptable by grace, how then shall we live?” What instructions do the Apostles and elders have for new Gentile believers to help them answer that question? How should we live? And they tell them, “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.”

Now notice, this is not at all intended as a full answer to the question, “How shall we then live?” There is a lot more instruction to give. We are supposed to go and make disciples, teaching them

everything that Jesus has taught us. If we want instruction, commandment, stipulations, we have got the whole sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-8. You can go to Romans 12-15, you know, it's command after command after command. Ephesians 4-6. There's a whole lot more than these four commandments from James. Read the letter of James. He has got a lot more to say himself about the practical issue of how then ought Christians live.

James is not trying at all to cover the whole second question here. He is not saying, "If you only do these things, you will have the Christian life covered." He is saying, "In regard to this issue of Jew-Gentile relationships that we are addressing right now, if you do just these four things, you will do well."

So, we ask, "Why these things?" There are four things here: (1) abstain from things sacrificed to idols, (2) abstain from eating blood, (3) abstain from eating things strangled, and (4) abstain from fornication, or sexual immorality. That's an interesting list. The first commandment has to do with idolatry. The next two have to do with ceremonial food laws. And the fourth has to do with sexual morality. Why these things?

Four Principles Behind New Covenant Commands

I can think of four reasons that Jesus and the Apostles give us New Covenant commands. I will call those reasons, ritual, moral, love, and wisdom. These are not absolute categories. There will be overlap. Still, these categories identify four principles for us to consider. First is ritual. If God tells us to perform a ritual, then we ought to do it because God told us to do it. Ritual does not save us. Ritual reminds us of truth in an experiential way. Two New Covenant rituals commanded by God are baptism and the Lord's Supper. This category is seriously reduced in the New Covenant when we compare it to the Old.

Our second option for why a commandment might be given is moral. The Old Covenant call of Leviticus 19 to be holy as God is holy continues on into the New Covenant. God's will for us is to live in goodness. Abundant life is experienced by living a life of love, and integrity, and uprightness. We reflect God when we live as His image in the world. We were created to do this, to be His image, to be holy as He is holy. I do not obey the moral commands of the Old Testament as an obligation to the Old Covenant, because I am not under Old Covenant. I obey the moral commands revealed in the Old and New Testament as one under New Covenant, who has an obligation to the Spirit indwelling in me to live according to who I have been created to be in Christ Jesus. God's moral character does not change. And that is why the moral commands of the New Covenant line up perfectly with the moral commands of the Old.

Our third option is love. This motivation for command overlaps a lot with the moral commands, since the moral commands are all ultimately an expression of love for God or love for our neighbor. The emphasis I am putting here is more on me choosing to limit my freedom in Christ for the benefit of another person. It may not be immoral to drink wine under certain circumstances, but if my drinking a glass of wine causes my brother to stumble then I might choose, out of love for my brother, to refrain. This is Paul's discussion about accepting one another in Romans 14. And as he says before that in Romans 13:8, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law." So, reigning in my freedom for the sake of showing loving concern for someone else is a motive for New Covenant command.

Our fourth option is wisdom. Again, there is overlap with what is moral and what is loving, and yet, this is another helpful perspective. We might say, "I am free to do this in the Gospel. And I am not hurting anybody, so it is not unloving, but is it the wise thing to do?" You know, it's not immoral. It's not unloving. But is it wise? In this, we are considering the consequences of our actions on ourselves in how is this going to affect me, and on other people. For example, it would be unwise, if nobody is around, it would be unwise for me to drink even to drink one glass of wine at dinner if I am a recovering alcoholic. So, even though I might be free, there's nothing particularly sinful against one

glass of wine, so it's maybe not clearly immoral, it's maybe not unloving because I'm by myself, but it's not wise.

These four principles help us think about different motivations behind New Covenant instruction. With these in mind, we can now turn to James' list of commands and ask with each one, "Is this command based on a principle of ritual, morality, love, or wisdom?" If you want to pause here, think about yourself. You can do that. You can go through the four commands and think, is this ritual? Is this a ritual command? Is this a moral command? Is this a command out of love? Or is this a command out of wisdom? Beginning with our first option, none of these commands are ritual commands. There is no confirmation anywhere else in the New Testament that God has established ceremonial food laws for the New Covenant. The command that you cannot eat blood sausage is not anywhere affirmed as a ritual or ceremonial decree. In fact, God showed the end of the food laws to Peter in his vision of the sheet coming down from heaven when he was told to kill and eat. We removed the food laws so the Jews could interact freely with Gentiles.

Okay. So, these are not ritual. Is James motivated to give moral instruction? Is that the motive here? The last command addresses a clear moral issue. Sexual intimacy is reserved by God for marriage. This has to do with something intrinsic in our nature as human beings and as male and female. The other commands could have something to do with moral behavior but seem not to. But maybe. Maybe it's about idolatry. Worshiping false gods is immoral. Eating food sacrificed to idols was a means of interacting with a god. The ceremonial restrictions on consuming blood and strangled animals are connected to pagan worship practices. If a Christian performs any of these actions with the intent of worshiping or manipulating gods or other spiritual beings, then that Christian is committing the sin of idolatry, and that is a moral issue.

However, that does not seem to be the motive behind James' instruction. As Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 10, it is possible for a believer to acknowledge that meat has been sacrificed to an idol, and with a good conscience honestly eat the meat with no attempt to worship that false god at all. They reject the occult. They reject pagan gods. They recognize the demonic behind false religion. They are fully aware. When they eat meat from the market, they know it might come from a temple, but they eat without any temptation to interact with or worship or manipulate some god through their eating. They simply want meat for dinner.

Likewise, though pagan rituals involve eating blood as a way to commune with the gods, Christians who are free from that kind of superstition can, with a clear conscience, eat blood sausage or a strangled animal that has not had its blood drained away. This is what 1 Corinthians 10 is teaching. It is not the eating that is immoral. It is the potential meaning of the eating that might be sin in the heart of a person. So, these commands could have to do with the immorality of idolatry. Or not. It depends on the heart of the one eating.

We are on to something when we recognize that all four of these commands are related as pagan religious practices designed for communicating with the gods. I think that is even why abstaining from fornication makes this particular list. James is not implying that Paul and Barnabas forgot to talk to the Gentiles about sexual purity. They don't know that they ought not to have sex out of marriage. I am sure that Paul would have been teaching sexual abstinence outside of marriage. That is consistent in his letters. James does not need to recommend that for moral reasons. So, why include sexual abstinence in this list? In this time period, sex with a temple prostitute was a way to commune with certain gods. That's one way sex ties into false worship. Sex with non-believers is also a major temptation that leads to false worship. That's a consistent principle all the way through the Bible. If you want to lose, or weaken, or derail your faith, you know, if you just don't care that much about your faith or your relationship with Jesus Christ, it's just not that important to you, then date or marry a non-believer. That's basic wisdom played out over and over and over. A marriage between a believer and a non-believer is so much more likely to end in the believer moving away from God than the non-believer moving towards God. I have seen that principle consistently in student ministry. If

an involved student suddenly stops coming to prayer, or Bible study, or a fellowship gathering, the first question that enters my mind is, “Who are they dating?” Who we worship affects our behavior, and how we behave affects our worship. This is preeminently true in the area of sex. Your behavior will change who you worship, or your view of who you worship. There may be no other area of life that we are more likely to come up with a new theological perspective on God, or the gods, to justify our behavior than the sexual area of life. We have one view of God when we are not dating. But when we start dating, we start shifting, and questioning, and trying to go as far as possible and justify our actions. That’s why idolatry and sexuality are addressed together in the holiness code of Leviticus 18-20 and in Paul’s indictment of the pagan worldview in Romans 1:18-32, because sexuality has a special connection to false belief.

Recognizing the connection all four of these commands to worship practices in the Gentile world, points us in the right direction to understand what these commands are all about. I have said that the commands are not motivated by New Covenant ritual and not by moral instruction, so, what is the motive for the commands? We have two more options. They are either motivated to show love for others, or to exercise wisdom for oneself or ones’ community? I believe both are in mind here, love and wisdom.

When James first suggested his list in 15:20, he made two comments that gave context. He said, “It is my judgment that we do not trouble the Gentiles.” He did not say, “We need to make sure the Gentiles get correct teaching about the moral life.” He didn’t say, “It is my judgment that we create this whole list of things that will guide the Gentiles in how they should behave.” He said, “Let’s not trouble them.” James believes he is suggesting something that will not be a big burden. He does not want to make a big, long list of rules for the Gentiles to follow. So, what is he thinking? He goes on to add in verse 21,

“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Why does that matter? It matters because of relationships. It matters because of witness. The witness of believing Gentiles; believing Gentiles who want to give witness to non-believing Jews, or to God-fearers who haven’t believed in Jesus, or to other Gentiles who have some knowledge of Moses because Moses is preached. These commands will help with that witness. And it’s also important for relationship of believing Gentiles with believing Jews. I think James is saying, “You will do well to avoid these things because these things, with their association to pagan ritual, are especially abhorrent to Jews everywhere. Just don’t do these things. If you will limit your own freedom by avoiding them, you will help your brothers and sisters who are Jews, and you will enhance your witness to other Jews and to people who are aware of Jewish teaching. And by this, you are loving them. Similarly, Paul explains his heart desire for limiting his freedom this way in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33,

“³¹ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; ³³ just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved.”

Limiting freedom for the well-being of others, for the potential salvation of others, is an act of love. Why? So that some may be saved. Morally, you may be free to eat meat sacrificed to an idol or eat an animal killed by strangling. If you are in know way tempted to worship a false god through those acts, it is not immoral for you to do so. But it may not be loving. The mature Christian limits his or her freedom on occasion out of love.

I believe there is also a principle of wisdom at work here in James’ advice. The New Covenant does not demand of ethnic groups that they do away with their cultural habits and practices in order to enter the kingdom of God. The New Covenant does call all people, everywhere to yield to a new spiritual identity in Christ. A predominantly animistic, or Hindu, or Muslim, or Jewish culture may celebrate certain practices that are quite neutral. It is not a bad thing to pray five times a day. You

don't have to be Muslim to pray five times a day. And if you're a Muslim who believes in Jesus Christ, you can keep going praying five times a day. The content of your prayer is going to shift, but the cultural practice can stay the same. It is not a bad thing to not work on the Sabbath. It's actually a pretty good practice to not work on the Sabbath, even if you want to shift Sabbath to Sunday. It is not a bad thing to remember ancestors who have died. You have this respect for those who have gone before us. And yet, there is a fuzzy border between neutral customs and practices that maintain our former spiritual and religious identity. This gets a bit tricky.

As a worshiper of Jesus can I enter a mosque while Muslims are praying? That is an interesting question. And you may say, "yes," or you may say, "no." Can I pray that Muhammad is God's prophet? Absolutely not! That may have been my former identity and it's a quite natural prayer for me. But even if I feel drawn to it, I have to set that aside. That is not of Christ. That is no longer who I am even if it's very important in my home culture. That's similar to a Roman Catholic who will not stop praying to Mary. You may explain to me that you are not worshiping, you are just asking for intercession like you would ask your own mother. My question would then be, "Can you stop praying to Mary? Is this an issue of religious identity to you? Can you give your focus in prayer 100% to God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ? Or is your Christian identity more about Mary than about Jesus?" And I can't answer that for a Catholic friend. You're going to have to answer it yourself because it's a question of the heart and the spirit.

Separating cultural identity from religious or spiritual identity is quite tricky, especially in a culture that has really strong traditional religion. And new believers need guidance towards fully embracing their identity as a worshiper of Jesus Christ. Before we can live in the freedom of the Gospel, we have to become aware of what binds us, what hinders us from being free in Jesus. And this is going to require learning to be honest with our own heart and conscience about why we are holding on to certain practices. It is wise to make a clear cut and just to step away from traditional religious practices that are not Biblical in order that we might learn to live in our new identity in Christ. And James' commands are urging Gentiles to do that. Step away from the sacrificed meat on feast day. Yes, it's a great opportunity to get some free meat or some cheap meat, but let's step away until you've become comfortable in your conscience that you don't believe you are worshiping or showing honor to a god by eating that meat. Step away from blood. Blood is magical in most pagan religions. It has strong spiritual overtones. If you have any symbolism of blood, you want to have it when you take the wine and the bread at the Lord's supper. Let's limit ourselves to that, to symbolic blood. It's really wine, it's not blood. And maybe you'll be free later to go and eat things strangled or to eat whatever. But step away. That's wisdom.

James' instructions are going to cause a bit of sacrifice for some Gentiles at family gatherings. They are not going to be able join with everybody else in going to the sacrifice at the temple. They are going to have to pass up certain foods. They are going to offend mom or offend an uncle or two. They are reminded clearly that temple prostitution is out, so, no late-night trips back to the temple with the cousins.

This is wisdom. This is recognition that it takes some time to free our hearts from the rituals and practices of our religious culture. We need to make a clear cut. We need to become grounded in our identity in Christ. Our hearts need to be truly free, in order to practice the freedom that is possible in the Gospel. If new Gentile believers will do these things instructed by James, they will do well. They will do well in their love for others, and they will do well in guarding their own hearts from the temptation to fall back into the spiritual identity of their culture.

The effect of the letter is telling. Paul and Barnabas arrive back in Antioch and Luke writes,

"having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."

We might think, "Oh wow, this is a big burden put on the Gentiles." They didn't think so. Two big questions were on the minds of the believers in Antioch. Are the leaders in Jerusalem adding some

requirement, like circumcision, to the Gospel? The answer, “No. The first question of the Covenant is clear. You are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen. Rejoice!” Next question. Are the leaders in Jerusalem advocating that Gentile believers keep the Mosaic law as part of living the Christian life? The answer, “No. The second question of Covenant does not demand a return to the old way of the written code of Moses. You don’t have to be circumcised. You can keep eating shrimp.” Hallelujah! This is good news! We rejoice!

The commands James did recommend come out of love for brothers and sister in Christ and out of wisdom to separate from the old spiritual identity. We see in the report by Luke that the Gentiles in Antioch were glad to do these things. They rejoiced that the Gospel was not compromised and that they were given practical wisdom to help build unity in the body.

Return to Strengthen the Churches (15:36-16:4)

Luke wraps up Part IV of Acts with a report of Paul taking this letter with him and returning to strengthen the churches of Galatia. This report contains two very surprising events. We will go over it quickly. I will address the two surprises one after the other. The first surprise is in Acts 15:36-41. So, as Paul and Barnabas set out with this message of love and wisdom for the churches, and they are unable to even get started because of a sharp disagreement that arises between them.

Separation of Paul and Barnabas

Acts 15:36-41,

“³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, *and see how they are.*” ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. ³⁸ But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

What do we say about this? I could launch into a whole sermon here about conflict among missionaries. I certainly have a lot of stories I could tell both from personal experience and second-hand. And a number of those stories are my fault. You know, I started the conflict. As important as that discussion is, I will stay in the context of this chapter and keep my comments brief.

The text does not tell us a lot. Paul is ready to return and strengthen the brothers and sisters in all the churches he and Barnabas had planted together. It was very important to Barnabas that they take John Mark along. It was very important to Paul that they do not take John Mark along. Luke reports Mark’s turning back during the first missionary journey as desertion. That’s a strongly negative word. As we said in a previous lesson, we do not know why he turned back exactly. We do not know if it was a theological difference, or a personality difference, or a character weakness. We can only assume from the word, “desertion,” that Mark was obligated to go on, and without the blessing of Paul or Barnabas, he left. At that point, the work load that Mark would have carried fell on Paul and Barnabas. They also lost the opportunity of mentoring a young man, an opportunity which could have easily gone to someone else if Mark hadn’t accepted the invitation in the first place.

Barnabas is convinced that Mark is ready for a second chance. And if tradition is correct in identifying this Mark with the writer of the Gospel of Mark, then Barnabas seems to have made a good choice. On the other hand, the success of Paul’s future missionary journeys and the ongoing participation of Silas suggest that Paul is choosing correctly. And the text tells us the brethren commend him to the grace of the Lord. By personality, I am more likely to do what Barnabas did and offer a second chance. By experience, I have come to appreciate the wisdom of Paul. Paul is not saying here that Mark is not forgiven or that Mark should not have a role in the church. Paul is saying that he is not

yet ready as a leader to risk the outcome of this missionary journey on Mark. He doesn't yet trust the character of Mark.

Regarding the question, "Who is right?", I am not sure there is a correct answer. It is possible that Paul, in his single-mindedness, makes a mistake here. It is possible that Barnabas, in his compassion, makes an unwise decision. The text does not indicate either of those things. It is also possible that two leaders with different gifts come to a disagreement that results, by the Spirit's leading, in the two leaders moving on in two different directions.

There may not be one who is right and one who is wrong in the eventual decision to separate. That might be the right decision. The rightness and wrongness may apply more to how they handle their conflict, how they treat each other. The text doesn't tell us. I have seen, more than once, two strong leaders in disagreement label each other in such a way that they cannot back down and they can't support the fact that the other leader is making a different decision. You know, they've said things like, "You are not Biblical!"; "Well, you are not following the Spirit!"; "You are being unloving!"; "You have no compassion!"; "This needs tough love!"; "You don't have wisdom!"; "This is a terrible thing to do!" Those kinds of claims, built up and repeated during in several meetings out of frustration and anger, you start to question the spiritual capability of the leader and the character of the leader, and you voice it. That kind of conflict does not simply end in disagreement. It ends in a disparagement of the other side, of the other person. And people are going to have to take sides. With that kind of language going on, people are going to have to go with Paul or go with Barnabas.

I do not think this conflict forces us to take sides. Whatever is said that may have been heated, it's not being reported. So, we do not see here the kind of language that disrespects and tears down the other leader. Certainly, they may have been hurt, and angry, and frustrated. But Paul does not denounce Barnabas. And Barnabas does not disinherit Paul. They disagree. They disagree strongly. And they go different ways. And from what we know, God blessed both paths. The separation may have caused a change in Paul's plans. He had suggested to Barnabas that they go back to all the churches they had planted. That would have entailed Paul and Barnabas sailing for Cyprus. Instead, Barnabas goes to Cyprus without Paul to strengthen those churches. And Paul heads up north by the land route curving around through Cilicia to reach the Galatian churches. Interestingly, the routes chosen coincide with the home provinces of each. Barnabas from Cyprus goes to Cyprus. And Paul from Cilicia travels through Cilicia.

The Circumcision of Timothy

In addition to this surprisingly sharp conflict between Barnabas and Paul, we find a second surprise in our last five verses. Paul sets off with Silas. They pick up Timothy in Lystra, and Paul has him circumcised. What in the world! Didn't we just confirm that circumcision is not necessary? Didn't James even leave that out of the list of practical commands? Nobody is being instructed to be circumcised. What's up with this Paul? Let's read the text. Acts 16:1-5,

¹ Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, ² and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. ⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."

Luke continues his pattern of overlapping the major parts of Acts. Instead of ending Part IV with his standard summary statement before Paul suggests starting the second missionary journey, Luke goes ahead and writes about the start of the second missionary journey and then ends Part IV. I totally would have ended at 15:35, right after we got the resolution of the council and the positive response in Antioch. They Gentiles rejoiced. "The churches were being strengthened in the faith and were

increasing in number daily.” The end. That’s where that summary belongs. Then we start Part V at the beginning of the second missionary journey. This just makes no sense for Luke get us barely started into the second missionary journey and then end with the summary statement.

Well, actually, when taking a closer look it does make sense. The return to strengthening the churches reported here parallels the return to strengthen the churches in chapter 14. Remember, we have two movements in Part IV of Acts, the first highlighting the preaching of salvation and the second highlighting the terms of salvation. The first movement began with a trip from Antioch to Paphos. The second movement began with a trip from Antioch to Jerusalem. The first movement ended with a trip strengthening the churches. Now we see the second movement ending with a trip to strengthen the churches. So, Luke’s decision in how to report these events produces this well-balanced structure.

Even more importantly, Luke is using the story of Timothy to develop our thinking about the terms of salvation. The content of this story fits better in Part IV, even if it is the first part of the second missionary journey. This idea of Timothy being circumcised really has to do with this idea to live out the Gospel with love and wisdom. This second movement began with a claim that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. That claim threatened the Gospel. Now that we have firmly rejected that claim, Timothy is free to choose circumcision. This is the importance of clear and emphatic teaching about grace. Nothing else can contribute to your justification! Circumcision is not necessary. Baptism is not necessary. Taking the Lord’s supper is not necessary. Keeping the Sabbath is not necessary. Bible study and prayer are not necessary. There is one thing that is necessary, faith in Jesus Christ. That is the first question of Covenant. And when we truly believe in Jesus Christ, it’s going to lead us, as true believers, into the second question, “How then shall I live?” And now all of those things matter. Now we think about all of these things, and they become important. They become necessary in our growth and in our life with God, that were not necessary for salvation.

So, when we’ve established that it’s only by faith in Jesus Christ, we can then enter into the challenge, the struggle, the messiness of the second question of Covenant. “How we are made acceptable?” is easy to answer in the Bible: by grace through faith. That’s it. “How then should we live?” is a lot harder. That’s the question they were working on with the letter from the Council. That’s the disagreement that separated the dynamic duo of Paul and Barnabas. They disagreed on how we ought to live, how we ought to go about our ministry strategy. And that’s the question leading to Timothy’s circumcision. “How then shall we live?” is not an easy question. But that is okay. The Gospel has freed us up to engage the answer without fear. We are free to make mistakes because we stand secure in the knowledge that we are accepted by grace. We don’t stay safe by getting everything right. We are safe in His love, and we can strive to live for Him, learning as we go. To be circumcised or to not be circumcised is now about love and wisdom. And in some situations you would say - most situations you would say, “No, it’s no point.” But there may be a case where it’s the loving thing to do, where it’s the wise thing to do.

And Paul has reasoned this way. People knew that Timothy’s mother is Jewish. And they knew that his father was Greek. That’s available knowledge around Southern Galatia. Somebody is going to find out that Paul has a Jewish traveling companion who was not circumcised because of his Gentile father. Ethnicity is proven through the mother. The father’s identity may not be 100% sure. But who gave you birth, that’s clear. His mother is Jewish, so he is Jewish. That’s available knowledge around southern Galatia. Somebody is going to find out that Paul has a Jewish traveling companion who was not circumcised because of his Gentile father. To avoid one more reason for opposition from Jews, Paul has Timothy circumcised. This is not at all an issue of salvation. This is an issue of love and wisdom in the life of someone who aspires to a ministry calling. Full-time Christian service is a higher calling, there is a higher standard. Not that people in full-time Christian service are more spiritual. But people are watching. And you’re representing Christ in a particular way. Mark did not get this. He turned back and deserted on his first missionary journey. It was going to a tough lesson for Mark. He got it later. Timothy seems to have got it here. He accepts Paul’s wisdom. He wants to join the team.

So, he is circumcised out of a desire to minister effectively, to make a difference. I will be circumcised if it will help me make a difference. Timothy is willing to give up his freedom to not be circumcised in order to help draw other people closer to the cross.

So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 15:22-35. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Do you see a unifying principle to the four commands James suggests be sent to Gentile believers in 15:29? Do any of the commands stand out as not fitting with the others?
3. Are these commands related to the first question of covenant or the second question of covenant?
4. What are the motives for these commands? Which of the motives suggested in this lesson seem to apply: ritual, moral, love or wisdom?
 - a. Are the commands for the Gentiles or for helping the Gentiles not be a stumbling block to Jews?
 - b. Are the commands for Gentile believers to challenge them to step away from religious aspects of their culture that might prevent them from walking with God?
 - c. Do you see some other reason for these commands?
5. Read Acts 15:36-16:5. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Perhaps neither Paul nor Barnabas was in the wrong over the dispute about John Mark. Nevertheless, which one feels to you to be “more” in the wrong? Why do you lean that way in your assessment? What considerations might lead to the assessment that neither was in the wrong?
7. How do you understand Paul’s move to have Timothy circumcised in light of his participation at the Jerusalem council? What motivates Paul? Is he being hypocritical?