

THE LAW DON'T GO 'ROUND HERE

ACTS 15:1-21 JUNE 17, 2020

Who is allowed access? That's an important question, but not one we think about very much. We all know the old list: "No shirt, no shoes, no service." But, sometimes it takes a little more than that. Did you know that, according to an ordinance in Atlanta, Georgia, "smelly people" are not allowed to ride public streetcars?¹ The stinky among us aren't only in danger of missing the bus. In 2014 the city of Burien, Washington passed an ordinance with said people could be excluded from parks or even city hall for a "variety of behaviors, including hostile language, not enough clothes covering the body and [smell]. The law allows Burien Police to bar the offender from the public space for up to a year."²

Many of us here probably aren't deep students of the historic church councils. There were lots of them over the centuries. Some of them were more significant than others. The decisions at the Third Council of Constantinople don't really have a meaningful impact on our Biblical faith today.³ But there's one council that makes a huge difference for us, the very first one in Jerusalem.

In fact, *our* ability to do church the way we do is a result of what was decided in Acts 15. It was clear that Gentiles were allowed to join the Church, but the question was: *How* were Gentiles to come in? What do we have to "wear" or how do we have to "smell?" As Gentiles, do we have to first convert to Judaism and *then* receive salvation in Jesus Christ? Is obedience to the Levitical Law the ship that takes us to the new world? These are important questions. We are able to take them for granted now that it's been decided, but in the first decades of the Church's history, this was a fierce debate.

As we see the Jerusalem council in our text we can notice a couple of important spiritual themes. One is that of God's providence, working itself out, despite obstacles and opposition and all the odds stacked against grace. Another is that, even though God *will* have His way, we as individuals still have a duty and a responsibility to go submit and go along with Him. To be a *part* of providence, instead of *resisting* God's work. This was the choice presented to Esther. God *would* accomplish His purposes. But, would Esther cooperate and allow herself to be a part of it, or would she refuse to cooperate and be set aside? We'll see examples of believers who choose one way and believers who choose another and we'll see the potential outcomes of either choice.

As we begin, we find ourselves in Antioch of Syria. Paul and Barnabas have been spending time in the healthy, growing church there. And then we read verse 1:

Acts 15:1 - Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved."

It's hard to be sure of the timeline, but it seems that what we're reading here lines up with what Paul talks about in Galatians 2.⁴ Piecing it together, it seems that Peter had come to Antioch at some point, had enjoyed his time there among the mostly-Gentile disciples. Then these guys come from Jerusalem and start teaching that Gentiles *must* become practicing Jews. Peter, we're told in Galatians 2:12, was *afraid* of their criticism, so he pulled back from these Gentile Christians and acted in implied agreement with the Judaizers. And Barnabas was led astray for a time.

¹ Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts, Ted Hobbie *Wacky Laws, Weird Decisions, & Strange Statutes*

² <https://www.ajc.com/news/national/new-ordinance-allows-police-ban-smelly-people-from-city-buildings/0ExszxDtyeJmpOvTOqcT0M/>

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_seven_ecumenical_councils#Third_Council_of_Constantinople_\(680%E2%80%93681\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_seven_ecumenical_councils#Third_Council_of_Constantinople_(680%E2%80%93681))

⁴ Ivor Powell *The Amazing Acts & The Pulpit Commentary*

Who were these guys? Luke doesn't name them, but from the context and comparison it seems they were associates of James, the Lord's half-brother, who had become a primary leader in the church at Jerusalem. They must have claimed to be official representatives, because later, in verse 24, the elders of the church feel it's necessary to say, "We did not send or authorize these guys." If these were just random guys, there wouldn't have been such a big fuss over their pocket teaching.

Let's take a look at what they said. They weren't saying, "This would be a best practice," but, "You can't be saved if you don't do these things." They were adding pre-requisites and requirements to the Gospel. Now, this passage and many other in the New Testament make it clear, that's always a no-no, but it still happens today. Not just from cults or other religions, but from *within* the church itself. There are traditions which say you cannot be saved if you are not water baptized. There are those who say to be a Christian you *must* speak in tongues. There are those who say you must *keep the Sabbath*. These debates continue despite the clear teaching of Scripture. This is why we're warned so often about false teachers. Jesus warned us, Paul warned us, Peter warned us, John warned us, Jude warned us, Hebrews warns us. There *are* false teachings that try to work their way into the Church at large and we need to be able to spot them and throw them overboard.

How do we spot them? First, by being well-versed in the teachings of the Bible, once for all delivered. We can spot them when we see people playing fast and loose with details of theology. For example: These guys boil down their argument saying "circumcision was prescribed by Moses." Actually, circumcision predated Moses by hundreds of years. It was given to Abraham.

Second, we're given a description of false teachers in 2nd Timothy, where Paul says:

2 Timothy 3:5a - [False teachers will] hold to the form of godliness but denying its power.

That's exactly what these Judaizers were doing. They denied the testimony of what God had been doing in Antioch, in Cyprus, in Galatia. They cancelled all of that and said, "Nope, you have to follow this form of ours."

Acts 15:2 - ²After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue.

Paul must have brought Barnabas back over to the grace side after his slip into legalism. And they stand together, willing to die on this hill. This would be a battle Paul would have to fight again and again, but it was worth it.

I do commend the church at Antioch for this: They were willing to submit if necessary. These Judaizers had street cred. They probably made some strong arguments. And the Gentiles in Antioch were humble enough to say, "Well, let's get this decided, and if we need to become Jews, we'll become Jews."

What arguments could these guys have made that would've had any convincing effect? Dr. H.A. Ironside points out that a variety of passages like Isaiah 60 and Zechariah 8 indicated that the Gentile nations would come to God *through* Israel. Wouldn't that mean circumcision and all the rest?

Acts 15:3 - ³When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

A tell-tale difference between legalism and grace is seen right here. Legalism brings burdens, grace brings joy. In a few verses Peter's going to say to these legalists, "You're weighing people down!" Look what happens when Paul goes somewhere with the Good News of God's grace: They're brought great joy. As a simple point of application, as you travel the roads of your life, whether they be the 198 or on the information superhighway, bring joy. Not anger. Not bitterness. Bring joy.

It seems likely all these guys travelled together. If so, that would've been an interesting road trip.

Acts 15:4 - ⁴When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

As a church, we want to be *welcomers*. Even if there is friction that needs to be resolved, we can still extend care and compassion to those we disagree with. We should be the warmest, most welcoming place in town. Not always easy, but always part of God's call in our lives.

Acts 15:5 - ⁵But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

It wasn't just a few guys in verse 1 who felt this way about things. There was a whole *party* of Christians in the church at Jerusalem who felt the same. They had been biding their time and now were ready to launch their attack on salvation by grace through faith. What a sad thing that, having heard all that God had done, they saw no reason to celebrate, no reason to thank the Lord, no reason to be excited or want to be a part of it themselves. No, their party politics demanded that they *exclude* all of that and all those people until they conformed their lives to this Pharisaical model.

We've got to be careful we don't become like this. Not in regard to following the law of Moses, I doubt there's much danger of that. But, think about it this way: If we heard from a reliable source that our Governor converted to Christianity, was born again like the Governor of Cyprus had been, I *hope* we would celebrate and honor God. I hope our first response wouldn't be to demand that he start doing what we wanted him to do. See how these guys were *demanding* that the apostles *command* the Gentiles not *just* to be circumcised, but to keep ALL the law. Enforce it!

This is what legalism does. It excludes. It demands. So far in Acts the church really hasn't been in the "command" business. They've been in the conversion business, the communion business, the community business, but they haven't been issuing laws and regulations. Let's put this isn't plain, practical speech: If your church demands that you sign some agreement in order to be a member in good standing, that is Pharisee behavior, not grace.

Now here we can see some of the fantastic providence of God. At the moment this all breaks out, threatening the future of the Church, who is there but the *Pharisee of Pharisees*, Saul of Tarsus. And the apostle Peter who God had specifically used to break down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile.

Acts 15:6 - ⁶The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.

Take note: These were all Jews. In the modern way of doing things, there wasn't fair representation. But, once again, we find that if people are obedient to the Lord and are full of the Spirit then God breaks down obstacles, overcomes our deficiencies and is able to do the impossible.

Acts 15:7 - ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe.

Much debate. They really struggled with this. It seems crazy to us, but it wasn't so easy then.

Peter stands, with great courage, and reminds them of what God had done in regard to Cornelius and all the Gentiles he represented. Again we see providence in action. Had it *only* been Paul standing for grace he could've been delegitimized. The guys in Jerusalem weren't all that excited about him anyway. But Peter himself was there *and* was willing to do his duty toward grace.

Peter points out that its as *God's express purpose from the early days* that Gentiles be saved. It was an act of *adoption*, not *immigration*, if that makes sense.

Acts 15:8-9 - ⁸And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

Salvation is a *heart* issue. It is not about merit or behavior or effort. It is accomplished in the heart. Now, it's *obvious* that once a person has surrendered their life to Jesus Christ they are then responsible to obey the many things He has commanded. But what we're talking about here is salvation: How can a person be saved from the penalty of their sins. And *that* is done at the heart level, by grace, through faith plus *nothing*.

If circumcision or anything else was necessary, God had *no problem* directing His people in the time of the Acts. Think about the many, detailed ways He revealed His truth and His desires and His directions and how they were able to grab hold of those things and run with them.

Faith is the way. Faith plus *nothing*.

Acts 15:10-11 - ¹⁰Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples' necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.”

Notice that Peter calls them “disciples,” not “Gentiles.” I think that's great. And notice how he puts them *first* in verse 11 in a wonderfully unexpected reversal: “*We're* saved the same way *they* are.” That's a heart of grace.

Peter also gives these Judaizers a humbling talking to. He is a better student of their history than they are themselves. He says, “Your ancestors couldn't do this. We couldn't do it either.” And that's the crux of the matter. Not only has God revealed that salvation is by grace, through faith, not of works, but it's also been proven again and again that *no one* can live up to the Law. Not the Law of Moses, not the Beatitudes, because these are *perfect* standards. Any legalism that people try to put on you is *impossible*. That's why we're told in Proverbs 30 and in Titus 3 that self-righteousness is of

no benefit. We cannot wash ourselves. Only *ONE* Person could fulfill the law and that was Jesus Christ. After all the millennia of human history, *finally* there was Someone who could satisfy the requirements of the Law. And Paul would later explain in Romans 8:4 that He did it *FOR* us, because we cannot do it for ourselves. And Peter points out this is not just a difference of style or opinion, no, legalism puts an impossible, cruel burden on people that *should not be there*.

Acts 15:12 - ¹²The whole assembly became silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Another way to spot a legalist: A legalist goes to other Christians and complains that they're not doing it right. A true servant of God goes into the world and is used to *rescue*. You look at Paul and Barnabas and you see God actually *did* something with them. What did the legalists do? They went to a healthy church and started hacking away at it.

Acts 15:13-18 - ¹³After they stopped speaking, James responded, “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written: ¹⁶After these things I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, ¹⁷so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles who are called by my name— declares the Lord who makes these things ¹⁸known from long ago.

James shows great submission to Jesus here. Because James was *deeply* Jewish. He was a strict law follower. And yet, he bowed to his Lord and said, “Lord, it doesn’t make sense to me to cast the nets on the other side of the boat, nevertheless at Your word I will.” And James acknowledges that this principle of grace wasn’t Paul’s idea or a Gentile idea, it was *God’s* idea and it was altogether Biblical. He references Amos chapter 9 here, which not only harmonizes with the work in the first century, but has a further fulfillment even future to us. A whole sub-theme we don’t have time for tonight is God’s plan for the end times brought out in this chapter. But here, we see God’s providence rolling along. He cannot be stopped or confounded. Our part is to join in and not stand on the wrong side of His will, even if it might cost us personally or challenge our traditions.

I think we can try to think the best of some of these Jewish believers. Perhaps they really thought they were being Biblical. But what we’re seeing here is that they were being *selective* in their approach to the Scriptures. They were cancelling out whole sections of prophecy, like Amos 9. Having read that and other passages, it should have come as no surprise to them that the door of salvation was flung wide to non-Jews.

We, too, need to be paying attention to Bible prophecy. I think we try hard to do that here. But a more modern example is how no one should’ve been surprised by the re-establishment of the nation of Israel. Before 1948 there were *some* who said “hey, this is going to happen.” But it was a big surprise to many in the Church, including theologians. It shouldn’t have been. So, we see that this wasn’t just a first century Pharisee problem, it’s one we want to be careful about too.

Acts 15:19 - ¹⁹Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God,

If a tradition or a teaching makes it *difficult* for a person to step through the door of salvation then it isn’t Jesus. If a teaching demands a person dress a certain way, act a certain way, pay some price to be saved, it isn’t the Gospel. Plain and simple.

It's been reported that in the Scientologist religion, if you want to be saved it's going to cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁵ That's not Good News. That's not Christianity.

But if you also say you must keep the Sabbath to be saved, *it's the exact same thing*. Now, that doesn't mean it doesn't cost anything to *follow* Jesus. Christians are definitely commanded to lay down our lives, take up a cross and count all as lost for our Lord. But the thief on the cross had no price to pay, it was being paid for him. All that was necessary for him to be saved from hell for heaven was to *believe*, and because of God's *grace* he was rescued from the guilt of his sin.

Acts 15:20 - ²⁰but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood.

If you were a pagan Gentile in that era, you were *soaked* in idolatry and sexual immorality. You didn't know those things were bad. It's like when you hear the testimony of cannibalistic tribes that are exposed to the Gospel. They didn't know they weren't supposed to *eat each other!* Gentiles needed to be told that sexual immorality was wrong.

But wait, didn't we just establish that there was no ritual law to follow? And won't Paul write a whole bunch of stuff about why a person has liberty when it comes to meat sacrificed to idols? Yes, he will. So what's going on here? Well, let's let James finish.

Acts 15:21 - ²¹For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues."

You see, all these Gentile Christians *would* be rubbing elbows with Jews and Jewish believers. It would be impossible for them to have communion together if they continued with some of these eating habits. The sexual immorality thing, that's not Levitical, that's God's forever standard. What James is doing is providing a practical guideline to help Gentiles not offend Jews in such a way that they couldn't have anything to do with one another. We live in a time and culture where there aren't divides quite like this. But, for these folks in Acts 15, this was a deal-breaker. And the Jerusalem council was not only answering a *theological* question, they also needed to solve a very real *relational* divide within the church. As Warren Wiersbe points out: Proper doctrine leads to *duty*. Duty to God, duty to one another.

We are wonderfully benefited by what happened at the Jerusalem council. Now, God was set on accomplishing His work of grace and He, through providence, was sure to get it done. But in these scenes we see there was a Paul and there were Pharisees. There was Peter who spoke up and the rest of the 12 who perhaps didn't. We want to orient our lives toward the truth, not only so that we're "right" but so that we can be used to further the providential work of grace in the Church and in our world. Because, as we see here, it makes a *big* difference. And His work is a work of *grace* and truth. One that does not exclude, but welcomes in all who will believe then transforming their lives, washing the paganism from their hearts and replacing it with purpose, humility and joy.

⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com/scientology-costs-leah-remini-recap-episode-3-2016-12#scientologists-allegedly-spend-thousands-of-dollars-to-purchase-every-book-written-by-founder-l-ron-hubbard-1>