

IT'S BETWEEN THE BROTHERS

ACTS 15:22-35 JULY 1, 2020

The classic Western scene is a town in turmoil, under the thumb of some self-appointed gunslinger. It's easy to tell who the bad guys are- they're practically in uniform. They move through town, making demands and knocking people down. But then, the white hats ride into view and after a flurry of action, when the smoke settles, the good guys are left standing. The town has been liberated, thanks to the kindness and sacrifice of those who were willing to do what's right.

Spiritually speaking, a similar scene was brewing in Antioch. A hostile band of marauders had come into town, demanding all the Gentiles bow their knees to the legalism of the Mosaic Law. In Jerusalem the issue had been resolved and now a posse was being sent to free the beleaguered faithful in Gentile territory. There would be no shots fired, no violent showdown at the corral. Instead, there would be the public reading of a letter. But that was enough to break the blockade.

As *students*, the Jerusalem Council is a big deal *doctrinally* and *legally*. As Gentiles, it clarifies for us the necessary content of our faith and our legal relationship to Jesus Christ. It gives the answer to the question: "Who may climb the mountain of the Lord?" in a New Testament sense.

But, in the moment, this was much more than an issue of doctrine or a legal decision. This was a *family* concern. There was more at stake than simply who needed to be circumcised. The challenge to grace threatened to disown and disinherit many brothers and sisters from the family of God. The apostles and the Holy Spirit were focused on repairing this breach and drawing together all members of the family in bonds of love. Tonight, with the delivery of the good news of grace to the Gentiles in Syria, we'll see our text again and again mention *brothers* and *sisters*. 8 times, in fact. And the result is a stronger church, a joy-filled church. A church that doesn't divide, but that rallies in love, moving forward together in the leading of the Spirit.

We begin in verse 22.

Acts 15:22 - ²²Then the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, decided to select men who were among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men among the brothers.

In the first half of the chapter we saw a dramatic meeting or series of meetings where it was decided that Gentiles did *not* have to follow the Mosaic Law in order to be Christians. This was being taught in Antioch by some Christians who had come up from Jerusalem, and it was the opinion of a group of Christians in the church known as "the party of the Pharisees."

But God had done a great thing: He changed hearts. Verse 22 says it wasn't just the 11 making some unilateral decision. It wasn't just the apostles and some elders. Not 50% + 1. This was the heart of the *whole* church, including, it seems, those in the party of the Pharisees. Now, as we've noted, this Judaizing issue would plague the church for a long time, especially the ministry of Paul, but here we see God's people unifying around grace.

Can your mind be changed? There are a lot of issues being discussed today, there are a lot of assertions being made, philosophies being submitted. Opinions being broadcast. Some of those ideas aren't worth our time at all, but we should be humble enough to acknowledge that *none* of us has perfect understanding. We know that's true when it comes to theoretical physics or higher math,

but, since we're not God, it's also going to be true about matters like politics. Ethics. Human relationships. These are realms we live in and need wisdom in. We find that wisdom in the Scriptures and by having the mind of Christ operating in us. To think that we've got all this stuff figured out is foolish. Sometimes God needs to change our minds. Not based on culture or on popularity or convenience, but by His undying truth. What an admirable thing that the party of the Pharisees stood in agreement. Not in anger or resentment, but with grace. In other words, what we see here was not a *partisan* solution to the partisan problem. It was the *spiritual* solution, guided by God.

The church in Jerusalem recognized the seriousness of the issue, they didn't treat it casually. They sent *leaders* to go and speak to these Gentile brothers in Antioch and wider Syria. Why wouldn't the letter be enough? Well, for one thing, they didn't want there to be a situation where legalists in Antioch accused Paul and Barnabas of making it all up. But I'd say because this wasn't just a legal issue, it was a *family* issue. So they sent some father figures to go and help these hurting children.

Acts 15:23 - ²³They wrote: "From the apostles and the elders, your brothers, To the brothers and sisters among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

The letter opens not, "from the Jews to the Gentiles," but, "from your brothers to you, our brothers." What a beautiful thing.

We call it the "*United States of America*," but, with a few exceptions, there's not a lot of unity among the people of our nation. Sure, at times of great distress, like war times, or we think of the unity after 9/11, there is a joining together in national identity. But our *default* is one of division. Just take a car with California plates up to Oregon or Idaho. Or think of the TV trope of the Southern, country bumpkin in the big city, not fitting in. Today we live in a dangerously divided nation. The Associated Press has a specially designed webpage dedicated to a series of pieces discussing how "Americans are more divided than ever."¹ On the front page it says:

"It's no longer just Republican vs. Democrat, or liberal vs. conservative. It's the 1 percent vs. the 99 percent, rural vs. urban, white men against the world. Climate doubters clash with believers. Bathrooms have become battlefields, borders are battle lines. Sex and race, faith and ethnicity ... the melting pot seems to be boiling over."

People are wondering what to do, how to move forward. *We've got the antidote to division.* It's the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The power of *grace*. *This* is the solution that can bridge the impossible divide between Jew and Gentile. Between tax collector and zealot. Between Pharisee and Centurion. And it's demonstrated right here in verse 23. Notice they didn't say, "We're writing to you brother and sister *Gentiles* up in Antioch." They said, "We're writing to you, our brothers who are *among* the Gentiles." Their passports still said "Syrians," but in the minds of the believers they were all citizens of Heaven, adopted siblings in the household of God. That adoption is meant to break down all barriers between us. Of *course* we'll come together from different backgrounds with different heritage and all sorts of variety, but each and all are made new by the blood of Jesus who bought us and made us His own and now knits us together as living stones, fitting together just so.

Scholars point out that where they say, "greetings" it literally means, "We wish you joy."² If we want to move forward together, we've got to lay down our desire to *win* or be right and first wish joy and rejoicing for the family of God.

¹ <https://www.ap.org/explore/divided-america/index.html>

² Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers

Acts 15:24 - ²⁴Since we have heard that some without our authorization went out from us and troubled you with their words and unsettled your hearts,

In the Church, *heart* health matters. These apostles weren't just worried about how to get more people in attendance. They wanted a heart healthy church. And they wanted them to know that they had not been part of sending these legalists up to Antioch, no matter what they had claimed.

It's very easy in our culture and in our age for people to *self* authorize. Anyone with a laptop or a phone can set themselves up as an authority from God. Be careful. Because, like these folks mentioned in verse 24, a lot of people out there are not on a mission to build you up, but to turn you upside down.³ That's the term used there for "unsettled your hearts." It's a term that means to plunder someone.⁴ Watch out for self-sent teachers or 'influencers.' Watch out for those who seek to do ministry with no accountability.

Acts 15:25 - ²⁵we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul,

Again we see remarkable spiritual unity. And we see tenderness. "Our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul." But we should also note that loving unity is not the same as "live and let live." The whole purpose of this letter and mission was to conclusively establish that grace plus nothing was the rule of the day. There was no wiggle room. No retreat from the truth.

Acts 15:26 - ²⁶who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew Poole points out that Paul and Barnabas had been vilified by the Judaizers in their home church at Antioch. Here, the brothers from Jerusalem were standing up for them.

One of the Puritans once wrote about the work of grace replenishing every void made by sin.⁵ As Christians we have the privilege of standing in support of those who are wrongly reviled. Multiple times the Bible talks about how we can strengthen those with weak knees.⁶

Paul and Barnabas had many vile things said about them but this much was certain: They had counted their lives as forfeit in their service to the Lord. Legalists can't claim that. They can only try to delegitimize people around them, knocking them down to make themselves feel higher.

This description of Paul reminds us that he never wanted to be known as the most important guy or the smartest guy in the room. In fact, even though God saw fit to show him incredible mysteries and deliver so much of the teaching of the New Testament through him, Paul said:

1 Corinthians 2:1-4 - When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters, I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan. ² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain.

³ Vincent's Word Studies

⁴ Cambridge Bible For Schools And Colleges, Barnes Notes On The Bible

⁵ Grace Active *The Valley Of Vision*

⁶ Job 4:4 Isaiah 35:3

Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit.

He and Barnabas lived for Christ's purposes, not their own. We want to follow in those footsteps.

Acts 15:27 - ²⁷ Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who will personally report the same things by word of mouth.

A big decision was coming down. Jerusalem was providing verification. It's ok to do a background check on someone who claims to be speaking for God. In fact, it's essential.

Now, wouldn't the letter and the testimony of the Holy Spirit in their hearts be enough? Sure, it *could* be. But here we see another example of how God wants to include us in His work. He didn't *need* Judas and Silas in order to get this job done. But He delights in utilizing us for all sorts of different missions. We often think of a "mission" or a "missions trip" as an evangelistic activity. But we should note in Acts there are a lot of *different* kinds of missions trips that God sends His people out on. He sent these guys to *endorse* and *encourage*. He sent Stephen to *engage* the members of a Synagogue. He sent Philip to *evangelize* in Samaria. Another time he sent Philip to *explain* a passage of Scripture to the Ethiopian Eunuch. From the get go God told Paul that He would be sending him on an ongoing mission to *endure* suffering for Christ.

There are a lot of different missions God might set each of us apart for on any given day. We want to be ready to report and execute our orders.

Acts 15:28 - ²⁸ For it was the Holy Spirit's decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements:

The Holy Spirit has an opinion. In the decisions you're facing, the tensions, the circumstances, the questions. God the Holy Spirit has an opinion. The key to successful ministry and successful Christian living is discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit. Because *sometimes* He says yes to things and sometimes He says no. Isn't the Word, on its own, enough? Doesn't it contain all we need for life and Godliness? Yes, it does. But, if there was no need for the daily filling, leading and intervention of the Holy Spirit, He wouldn't have been left here to help us after the Ascension.

So how do we hear from the Holy Spirit? Chiefly He speaks through the inspired word of God.

Hebrews 3:7-8a - ⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God,^{ba} and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The word of God *is* a direct line to the leading of God the Holy Spirit. But we're also told in First Corinthians chapter 12 that the Spirit is active in *gifting* us in certain ways to build up the Church. We're told He *distributes* certain gifts and attributes and we're to search those out so that we can be walking in step with the Lord. We're also told in First Corinthians 2 that we've been given the Spirit *individually* so that we can have the mind of Christ in us and be instructed by it. "So that we may

understand what has been freely given to us by God.” And so, obviously, there must be personal communion and connection in our minds with the Holy Spirit through prayer and waiting on Him.

Paul also writes about how God works in our own hearts to develop Godly desires to do what pleases Him. These are some of the ways that we hear from and are led by God the Holy Spirit.

Now, the leaders in Jerusalem said that the list that followed were *requirements*. But aren't we saved by grace, through faith, not of works? Yes, we dealt with this last time. Suffice it to say, aside from the clear-cut issue of sexual immorality, there were some other dietary issues that needed to be addressed in order to promote the communion and community of Gentile and Jewish believers together. While the New Testament would go on to reveal that we have theological liberty when it comes to what we eat, we also have a *duty* as Christians to not stumble those around us. And that high goal of love and unity should lead to us living sacrificial lives toward others. Summarizing these requirements, Charles Ellicott writes: “An inspired commandment does not necessarily involve a permanent obligation.”⁷

Acts 15:29 - ²⁹ that you abstain from food offered to idols, from blood, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. You will do well if you keep yourselves from these things. Farewell.”

The heathens of the Roman world drank blood mixed with wine during their sacrifices to deities.⁸ So much of Christianity would've been totally new and foreign to these pagans out in the Gentile world. We'd note that they didn't say, “And we'll be checking up on you to make sure you're complying with what we said.” No, the Christian life is your personal responsibility. You'll stand before God alone and must answer whether you obeyed Him or not. *We* don't have to wait for someone else to tell us what righteous thing to do, go and search it out yourself in the Living Word and go God's way.

Acts 15:30 - ³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, and after gathering the assembly, they delivered the letter.

The way it's written gives us the impression there were not detours, no long way 'round. The Gentile church was, no doubt, waiting with great anticipation to hear how this was all going to shake out. Remember: They were willing to obey, but the personal cost could, potentially, be difficult and great.

We commend Judas and Silas here. Earlier we were told that they were revered, leading men in Jerusalem. But what do we see? They were willing to be letter carriers. They weren't promised any position of importance in Antioch. They weren't going to some award ceremony. They were delivering the mail that these strangers might be kept free in grace. They show wonderful humility.

Acts 15:31 - ³¹ When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

This was an authoritative epistle they were reading, but it filled them with joy. As Christians, sent to proclaim truth, let's never forget that we are going out with *Good News*. It has been given to instruct and encourage us, telling us of our freedoms in Christ, our responsibilities to Him and to our brothers and sisters and to this world. But this is all very good news. The good news of *grace* and transformation. The news that God has stepped down into the world to deal with sin and death and

⁷ Ellicott's

⁸ Vincent's Word Studies

that He can make all things new. God who can bring beauty from ashes and revolutionize not just one life or two, but whole generations by His power. Preach *Good News*.

Acts 15:32 - ³² Both Judas and Silas, who were also prophets themselves, encouraged the brothers and sisters and strengthened them with a long message.

Of course, their prophecy *agreed* with the written word. The same litmus should be used today when people speak a word of prophecy. We can avoid many missteps and burdens using this simple test.

Acts 15:33 - ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent back in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them.

We see a likeness and a cooperation and a similarity. These two churches, Antioch and Jerusalem were very, very different. And yet we see them filled and guided by the Holy Spirit and that brings unity. They were brothers. They were a family. And just as the 11 had sent out Judas and Silas to the brothers, so those in Antioch were sending them back. We don't know how long they stayed, some think it could've been a whole year.⁹ But, however long it was, it was long enough for Silas to make a great impression on the Apostle Paul. He would become a faithful traveling companion on his next missionary journey.

If you're reading in the NLT, the ESV, the NIV or the CSB (like I am), verse 34 is omitted. In the NASB it's bracketed. In the King James and New King James you'll probably have a note saying that verse 34 is not found in some of the manuscripts.

Some Biblical scholars think that it was, at some point, added as a marginal note. Altogether, the argument is inconclusive. Luckily, what verse 34 contains is not consequential when it comes to anything like doctrine. Here's how it reads in the New King James:

Acts 15:34 - ³⁴ However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

And then we have verse 35:

Acts 15:35 - ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas, along with many others, remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord.

There was a great teaching ministry in Antioch. We're told that there were "many others" there doing God's work. That work is, first and foremost, the planting of seed. The sowers go out to sow. And we're told that the seed is the word of God that we are sent to scatter all over the earth that receptive hearts might take it, believe and be saved. That is our most essential business. There are others things we can and should be doing, but if you're a farmer, the most important thing you do is plant.

Psalms 68:11 - ¹¹ The Lord gives the word, and a great army brings the good news.

That's us. A band of brothers. Sent out to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus by grace through faith. Bringing liberation to a world trapped and desperate. Let's ride in and save who we can.

⁹ Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible