

Reading Acts 15:13-35

¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon[□] has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ "'After this I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things'[□]—

¹⁸ things known from long ago.[□]

¹⁹ "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. ²³ With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.³⁰ So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ^[34] [□] ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

Teaching

I wonder how you would define a legalist. Someone overtly religious? It's difficult to preach to them. To paraphrase Matt22:14 Many are cold, and a few are frozen. Mark Twain writes: having spent a considerable time with "good" people I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners.

S Lewis Johnson says in his book "Paralysis of Legalism" one of the most serious problems facing the Christian church today is legalism. One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul's day was legalism. In fact, in every age legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with that joy goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, sombre, dull and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy killjoy. Sadly, the world at large sees most Christians as killjoys. My friend in work: you Christians are all the same – big bibles, grey suits and sour faces. To prove I hadn't had a humour bypass, I replied "och! that's just the women".

Before we consider legalism let's quickly recap on where the Rev. Jonny left us 2 weeks ago before the Harvest interlude. In the first half of Acts 15 Paul and Barnabus had returned from their 1st missionary journey to Asia Minor. They have returned to their home church in Syrian Antioch and have been telling the brothers there about how God has used them to open up the door of faith to the Gentiles. But their joy is short lived because some men have come down from Judea teaching the brothers " unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses you cannot be saved." This brought about sharp dispute and debate. This was no minor spat about what colour we should paint the rest rooms or should we lead our worship with piano or organ.

This threatened the very foundation of the gospel of Christ. Jonny reminded us of Eph2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this not of yourselves it is a gift of God not by works so that no one can boast. Paul knew the legalizers demands would be the thin end of the wedge, so Paul and Barnabus set off for a council in Jerusalem to oppose them before their position took root. Paul was correct the legalizers position had already hardened. In Antioch, you must be circumcised to be saved. In Jerusalem, you must be circumcised and be required to obey the Law of Moses to be saved. These legalists would not be content until their Gentile brothers converted to

Judaism before they adopted Christianity. You may think the Law of Moses is just the 10 commandments. No. It amounts to 613 statutes taken mostly from the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments.

Further details are available at the link above. These statutes consist of 365 “does” corresponding to the number of days in the year and 248 “do not’s”. 248 is the number ascribed to the number of bones and main organs in the human body. But these laws are supplemented by rules based on human opinion on how to practically adhere to the laws. For example, to keep the Sabbath holy no work is permitted on that day. Therefore, you are not allowed to carry a stick on the Sabbath, just in case you drag it behind you and be accused of ploughing.

We should not scoff; we’ve locked up the swings in our parks and even the swings in our budgie cages to keep the Sabbath holy. No wonder Peter says, “why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of these Gentile disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear.” He reminds the council. “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we are saved just as the Gentiles are.” The basis of salvation is the grace of God **alone**, received through faith **alone**, made possible by Christ **alone**. Paul and Barnabus cement Peter’s argument by telling the gathering about the miraculous signs and wonders done among the Gentiles by God through them. And now for today’s passage. Decision time! No council has any authority in the wider church unless it can be shown that its decisions are in accord with Scripture. So, it’s not surprising that James- leader of the church in practical matters- brings proceedings to a conclusion by quoting scripture from Amos 9:11-12 proving that God had always planned to bring the Gentiles into His kingdom. The council unanimously dissociates itself from the legalists and, by extension, the demands for Gentile converts to be circumcised and keep Mosaic law.

So, there is no change to the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith alone, to one of grace plus works of the law. But there is a compromise – not on matters of salvation or doctrine but on matters of fellowship and fellowship meals. James is aware that it’s a period of transition for the Church. More and more Gentile converts are coming into a fellowship that had been exclusively Jewish and he wants to promote unity between these 2 different cultural groups. So, he asks for a compromise from the Gentile converts

regarding where they source their foods and how their meat is prepared before consumption. He also calls for abstaining from sexual immorality. This seems to be a strange bed fellow- if you pardon the pun- to lie along-side food restrictions. But he is aware that it is a sin taken very lightly in the Greco-Roman world and was associated with pagan religious festivals involving temple prostitution.

Aside: Is James trying to slip in a wee bit of Mosaic Law by the back door? No! These divine instructions predated Moses and Abraham and circumcision. (1) After the flood God tells Noah in Gen9:3. “ Everything that lives, and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now also give you everything. But you must not eat meat with its lifeblood still in it.” (2) Jesus taught heterosexual monogamy by referring back to the Creation. Gen1:27,2:24 “In the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.”

Jesus prayed in Jn17:20-21 that his people might be united so that the world might believe on Him. This is the very unity that James wanted to promote and preserve. A unity based on love and not law. So, James upheld the liberty of the Gentile Christians but asked them to forego liberty in certain things so as not to offend, nor cause them to separate from their Jewish brothers. I am sure this pleased Peter who writes in 1Peter3:8 Live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. So, the delegation returned to Syrian Antioch with Judas and Silas. The people heard the council’s verdict and were glad for its encouraging message. And so, we come to the 21C Western church, which is exclusively Gentile in nature. But I hope we have enough sensitivity not to offer a new Jewish Christian convert a bacon sarnie or black pudding for breakfast and enough savvy to avoid sexual immorality – even though society would seem to take an ever more liberal view of such things. What role then should the law play in our spiritual lives? In Ro10:4 Paul says Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Everyone is defined in Gal3:28. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus. But didn’t God say Be Holy as I am Holy. (Lev17: 15) and Jesus in Matt5:17 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of the pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

Is their conflict between Paul and these statements? No! Think of an acorn. I can smash it with a hammer and that is indeed the end of the acorn. But I could choose to plant it. It is the end of the acorn as it fulfils its purpose in becoming an oak tree. Jesus said. Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I haven't come to abolish them but to fulfil them. Jesus did indeed fulfil the demands of the Law by keeping it perfectly in thought, word and deed and he paid the penalty on the cross required for all lawbreakers by the law. But if we accept him as Lord and Saviour, he becomes our righteousness, our right standing before God and the law no longer has any hold over us. But the law still remains and if we choose not to accept righteousness in Christ we will be judged and condemned by that law. The law cannot purify the sinner's heart, impart the gift of the Holy Spirit, or give eternal life. God has done these things only through His son. But surely grace can be abused. Freedom from demands of the law could dissolve into a licence to sin.

Preaching grace is dangerous. But in Ez36, Ezekiel prophesies about the Messianic era: I will remove from you, your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my law. So, Christians fulfil the demands of the Law by yielding to the Holy Spirit and allowing Him to work in our lives, transforming us from immature new-born to full Christlikeness. But sadly, legalists are so insecure in their faith that they are unwilling to accept salvation by grace through faith only. They feel they need an extra insurance policy of rule keeping (rules of their own invention), to retain God's favour and earn salvation by their own efforts. Unfortunately, they also feel obliged to burden others with their beliefs. They are not content until they turn others into clones of themselves-conforming to their culture, practising their customs and beliefs, their codes of conduct and even their modes of dress. If they are left unchecked these modern-day Pharisees would substitute God's grace with empty rule keeping and lead many astray.

I'll finish by paraphrasing Chuck Swindoll. If you're the type that bullies or looks down on others to make them to conform to your image, "Stop it!" When modern-day Pharisees try to control your life, "Stop them". Remind those religious phonies that the splinter in your eye is between you and God, and they should pay attention to the tree trunk in their own eye.