

'Acts' - Extra Teaching Points #19

Acts 15:1-21 (NASB)

Acts 15:1-11

*Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, **the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.** ³ Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." ⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ **"And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.** 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."*

Q: Why would Jews from Judea and "some of the sect of the Pharisees" be teaching that Gentile Christians had to become Jews (be circumcised) and observe the Law of Moses?

- We are not told specifically what their motives were, but it points back to the underlying problem the Jews always had:
 - **They thought they were a special group, and people would have to join their group and follow their rules to be acceptable to God.**
- Paul wrote the "Letter to the Galatians" to refute what these

Jews from Judea were saying to the Gentile Christians in those churches.

Q: Why did Paul and Barnabas need to go to Jerusalem and talk to the apostles and elders? Was the leadership there in charge of all the churches?

- They went to Jerusalem because the people who were distorting the Gospel ([Gal 1:6-9](#)) were from Judea, the Jerusalem church.
 - In the N.T., churches were not identified according to their congregational names or the buildings they met in.
 - They were identified only by the city or geographic region where they were located.
- Paul and Barnabas wanted the local leadership to address the problems being caused by some of their people, who were preaching a different gospel ([Gal. 1:7](#)).

Q: Peter recounts the conversion of Cornelius and his household that read we about in [Acts 11](#). What powerful truth is Peter testifying to?

- God has **FULFILLED** His covenant with Israel through Jesus ([Matt 5:17](#)), so now the covenant family is open to everyone, just as God had promised Abraham ([Gen 22:18](#))!
 - Jesus was the one and only fully faithful Israelite who God could partner with to bring His mercy and blessings to the whole the world.

Q: Can Christians today make the same mistake as these Jews from Judea? If so, how?

- Yes! In [Gal. 5:16-25](#), Paul warned Christians not to carry out "*the desire of the flesh.*"
 - The Jews from Judea were not being led by the Spirit, they were being led by their selfish human nature, which caused them to be divisive, argumentative, and cliquish.
- **Christians today who "do not walk by the Spirit" end up doing the same things *within* churches, and *between* churches.**
 - **The root cause is the same; and the results are also the same!**

Acts 15:12-21

All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴ “Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁵ “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶ ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, ¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’ ¹⁸ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. 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.”

Q: When James speaks to the people he quotes [Amos 9:11-12](#). Why would that quote be so persuasive and informative to the crowd?

- They would have been very familiar with what the prophet Amos wrote, and it was a very humbling passage for the Jews.
 - [Amos 9:11-12](#) comes right after [Amos 9:7](#), where God says He will bring a judgment on Israel so severe that they will be downgraded to being just another group, one of many, that God used to bring about His purposes.
- But, in this prophecy, God also promised to rebuild and restore the house of David, which is what James and the early Christians believed had happened when Jesus was resurrected.
 - **If God had rebuilt and restored the House of David with Jesus’ resurrection, then of course the rest of the prophecy had to be equally true—the rest of mankind and the Gentiles were welcomed into this rebuilt and restored house on the basis of God’s grace and their faith in Jesus.**

- They didn’t need circumcision or obedience to the Law of Moses to qualify them for membership!

Q: James has just argued that the Gentiles don’t have to qualify themselves to be Christians by obeying the Law of Moses. So why does he tell them, in [verse 20](#), they should abstain from “things contaminated by idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood”?

- First we should notice that James is **making a decision** about what the Jerusalem church should do ([vs. 19](#)), and **making a request** in regard to what the Gentile churches should do ([vs. 20](#)).
- In [vs. 21](#), he gives his reason for asking the Gentiles to abstain from “things contaminated by idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood”. The Law of Moses is preached in every city in the synagogues on the Sabbath.
 - The “things contaminated by idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood”, were the things associated with pagan worship, and would be offensive stumbling blocks to the Jews.
 - **In other words, James acknowledged that Gentiles didn’t have to obey the Law of Moses, but asked them not to be needlessly offensive to the Jewish Christians and Jews they were reaching out to.**

Follow Up Assignment

Q: Have you ever had another group of Christians insist that they are special, and that you need be like them? If so, how did it affect you?

- Have you ever thought of your group as special, and that other Christians need to be like your group? If so, how did it affect them?

Q: What kinds of things might James ask you to give up in order not to needlessly offend those with weaker faith ([Romans 14:1](#)), and people we are reaching out to?