

May 24, 2020

FAITH ALONE AND THE OBEDIENCE IT BRINGS

Acts 15:1-35

(12 of 17 in a series through Acts)

Growth can bring its problems. And quick growth can bring even bigger problems. Imagine you're operating a small business, making very intricate parts, and you're producing about a hundred of these a day. You stress to all your workers that what sets you apart from all competitors is the quality of your parts. Each one is carefully crafted and each aspect of it done with precision and attention. And then, you start to get orders of a thousand a day instead of a hundred. You of course would be thrilled, but all of the sudden, things also can feel a bit crazy with your small business quickly becoming a medium-sized or large business. And you'd expect there to be a moment at some point in the days or weeks after that initial growth where you have to say, "Hey, let's stop and just examine everything. We want to make sure that we're not only hitting our production mark in terms of numbers but also that there's no sacrifice of quality. In the midst of all this excitement, we don't want to cease to be who we always have been—a people who make a quality product with precision and careful attention to details."

I think that scenario that we could probably all understand in our day helps us understand why the events of Acts 15 happen. Let me explain. By the time you get to Acts 15 the church is exploding in terms of numbers. It happened quickly with Jewish converts, as the church at Jerusalem saw conversions of 3,000 or 5,000 in just two events. But it's not just Jewish converts. The Samaritans and Gentiles are coming into the church in great numbers as well. And this is where things get really tricky. The reason why is because in the Old Testament, there had been clear instructions that Gentiles could become part of the people of God, but the males needed to be circumcised. When Moses gave instructions for the Passover he wrote, "No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. . . . All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land" (Exodus 12:45-48).

So there had been Gentiles coming into the people of God throughout the OT. There had simply always been an expectation that they would basically become Jews. The males would be circumcised and all of them would be expected to keep the law of Moses. But now massive numbers of Gentiles were becoming Christians, and was this supposed to work the same way? Were any new believers supposed to basically become like Jews first? It kind of felt like a moment when everyone needed to step back and make sure everyone was on the same page. And that's just what happened.

It was all sparked by some men from Judea who came to Antioch and began teaching, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (v. 1). And Paul and Barnabas didn't agree and didn't take too kindly to this teaching that—in their minds—was false teaching. So Luke tell us, "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them" (v. 2), meaning they had a big dissension and debate with them. And then the church

determined that what they needed to do was send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders of the church there and settle this question.

Both their journey to Jerusalem and the initial greeting they received when they arrived were great. On the way, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling everyone about how the gospel was spreading among the Gentiles, and it “brought great joy to all the brothers” (v. 3). Then when they got to Jerusalem, they were welcomed and shared the same. All seemed good. Then, Luke tells us, “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and order them to keep the law of Moses’” (v. 5). And so this council at Jerusalem began in which the church addressed and settled this matter.

And there were two matters decided at this council in regards to the Gentiles. One had to do with what was necessary in order for them to be saved, and the other regarded how they were to live as saved individuals. And what I want to do this morning is simply make each of these decisions the point of my sermon and apply them to us because they do apply to us directly. So, let’s start with the first declaration which could be stated: nothing is needed to be justified before God except faith in the crucified and risen Lord.

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Let’s first walk through how this decision was arrived at, and then consider its ramifications. Well, we already know the stance of Paul and Barnabas because they had already had “no small dissension and debate” with the group who had first declared that Gentiles needed to be circumcised and keep the law in order to be saved. And what we find out once this council gets going is that Peter agrees one hundred percent with them.

Peter first notes that everyone is aware that God appointed him as the means whereby the gospel first went to the Gentiles—an obvious reference to when he went to the house of Cornelius and a number of Gentiles believed the gospel. He also notes that God bore witness to the fact that these Gentiles indeed had become genuine believers by bearing witness to their conversion in “giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us” (v. 8), as Peter notes. Now, the unspoken note at this point is that these Gentile believers weren’t circumcised at this point. In other words, if they weren’t circumcised and yet believed and received the Spirit, then it’s impossible to argue that someone has to be circumcised before becoming a Christian. And though Peter doesn’t state the point that they weren’t circumcised as part of their conversion explicitly, he does subtly make that point when he says that God “made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith” (v. 9). In other words, they were justified simply through faith.

But it is here that Peter turns the charge back on the Jewish believers who are pressing for the necessity of circumcision. He asks them, “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (vv. 10-11).

In other words, to insist that the Gentiles meet a standard that God doesn't demand is first putting God to the test, by opposing his will and inviting his judgment. But not only that, all of these believing Jews know that they couldn't keep the law themselves. Peter says that neither their fathers nor they were ever able to keep the law. And the reason is because the law never brought with it the transforming power to change someone's heart and enable them to obey. Rather, it just made demands—demands that the individual could never meet—and therefore it condemns and tells us we're worthy of death. That's why Paul spoke of the law as having a "ministry of death" and a "ministry of condemnation" (2 Cor 3:7, 9). Its very purpose was to condemn us and sentence us to death so that we'd quit hoping in our own abilities and look to Christ by faith. Grace is our only hope. That's what Peter is saying, and his plea is that if we know that for ourselves, it is not only unnecessary but against the very purposes and will of God to demand that others obey the law of Moses in order to be saved.

And after Peter went through this, the assembly fell silent. The issue was basically settled. You can't argue with what Peter says here. And so James—Jesus' half-brother and leader of the Jerusalem church—spoke up and declared that not only is what Peter said correct but the prophets themselves spoke of this reality of Gentiles being saved *as Gentiles*. He quotes from Amos 9:11-12 where the Lord speaks of a day when he would reunite his people (since the kingdom had already split at the time of Amos's ministry into Israel and Judah), when he united his people it would be made up of Jews and Gentiles who were called by the Lord's name. From that point on, the Scripture was looking for the king under whose reign God's people would be united. James tells us here what is obvious. That king is Jesus, and as he is the son of David reigning at God's right hand, under his reign God is bringing into his kingdom both Jews and Gentiles—anyone and everyone who believes. In other words, not only is the church here testifying that Gentiles are saved by faith alone without becoming Jews, but this was ever foretold in the OT itself.

Now the reason this is such an important point for us to return to again and again is because we're all tempted to be legalists in our hearts. Now, for us, I doubt we wrestle with thinking that we need to be circumcised in order to be right with God, but we do like to—to use Peter's words—place a yoke on our necks that tells us that we need to do this or that in order to merit a right standing with God. It may be that we think we need to have prayed so much or read so much in order for God to approve of us. Perhaps we think we are forgiven of sins only after beating ourselves up enough or wallowing for a sufficient amount of time in our guilt. And all of that kind of thinking is simply unbiblical. Not only that, but that kind of thinking never produces lasting obedience from the heart. It just doesn't.

So let me lay out a truth that may well help us get out of that pit in our hearts and minds. It's this: God demands absolutely perfect obedience if we are to be in right standing with him. Now, once you know that, do you really think that somehow reading the Bible a little more, praying a little more, or beating yourself up a little more allows you to measure up? That's hopeless. But here's the good news. Jesus not only paid for us sins by suffering, dying, and rising from the dead for us. But he also perfectly obeyed his Father, without exception. And when we place our

faith in the crucified and risen Lord, his absolutely perfect obedience is credited to us. That's the only way to be righteous before God, and that's all that's required to stand justified before God. Isn't that good news? So don't put a yoke around your neck that says you need more than what we have in Christ by faith in order to be right with God. Nothing more is needed. That was the first decision at the Jerusalem council. The second can be summed up in noting that once we are justified, God demands absolute allegiance and obedience to him.

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In other words, you can't follow Christ and try to keep a foot back in your old way of life. We see this in the second decision that James brings up. He sums up their first decision by saying, "Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (v. 19), but then he adds "but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood" (v. 20). And Luke adds, that they sent a couple from Jerusalem and Paul and Barnabas back to the Gentile believers at Antioch to tell them this announcement that they all agreed on, saying, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality" (vv. 28-29).

Now, these requirements can be confusing to us in a number of ways. Let me name a few. First, it contains some commands involving food and one about abstaining from sexual immorality. And we come with an awareness that Jesus had already declared all foods clean. But then as soon as you then say, "Well, maybe these aren't universal laws then," you run into one that most definitely is—abstaining from sexual immorality. So, for one, it's an odd combination of laws here. Second, if you take these as simply blanket commands for all believers on this side of Pentecost, then does that mean that you and I need to inquire about whether an animal was strangled to death before it made its way into the meat section at Kroger? If not, then why is this commanded here? If so, then what about Jesus declaring all foods clean? Not only that, but there is an explicit command here to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols" (v. 29), but Paul made clear to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 8-10 that there's nothing inherently wrong with eating meat that has been sacrificed to an idol. He tells them that if an unbeliever invites you over and offers you meat, just eat it. Don't ask if it's been sacrificed in the temple the week before. And the same thing with regard to buying meat in the market. You don't have to call the butcher and make sure the cow wasn't offered to Zeus before making its way to the market. Just buy it, take it home, and eat it to the glory of God. And it doesn't seem like Paul is taking these commands lightly because he not only tells the church at Antioch that this decision was one of agreement but that the Holy Spirit was in support of it (v. 28). Not only that, but Paul repeats these requirements again in Acts 21 to a group, expressing that this letter once more represents his view as well.

So now here's the issue. What can make sense of a list of requirements that involve food on the one hand and sexual immorality on the other, and what can make sense of Paul happily expressing these requirements in this letter while telling the Corinthians that they just need to

eat meat and not ask questions about how it was killed? Is there any way of seeing this as law that doesn't run against Paul's allowance of eating meat that you just buy in the market that may or may not have been sacrificed to idols or Jesus' declaration that all foods are clean and that makes sense of why these varied commands? Yes, I think there is.

I think these categories—eating meat sacrificed to idols, eating things strangled, eating blood, and sexual immorality—are describing activities that occurred at pagan temple feasts. You had these temples dedicated to pagan deities in cities throughout the empire, and they would have feasts there that would involve these activities. We can read a bit about it in 2 Maccabees 6, but there could be animal sacrifices by strangling, eating of blood and sexual immorality. And so I think that what is being required of the Gentiles here is that they do not involve themselves in these feasts, which would have been part of their lifestyle and the lifestyle of the entire community in their lives prior to conversion.

In other words, what they're forbidding here is not necessary eating meat sacrificed to idols. They would agree with Paul that there is not anything inherently wrong with that, and you can go to your market, buy meat, and not have to inquire with the butcher whether the bull or goat had been sacrificed down at the temple or been killed by strangling the day before. Just buy and eat. The issue is not simply the food. Rather, as one commentator has said, the issue "is one of venue, not menu."¹ The Jerusalem council is telling the Gentiles not to attend these feasts down at the temple and involve themselves with all the acts that go on there. For Jews, who hear the law of Moses read every Saturday, this would have seemed obvious. They never would have considered it in their life prior to faith nor now. But for Gentiles, it could be tempting, especially if they say, "But we know there's no god in that meat. Why not eat it in the temple?" But the Jerusalem council is saying that they need to part with that lifestyle altogether.

A comparison might be if a parent said to his son before he heads back to the secular college before his senior year, "Now listen, don't go down to the frat house, with the drinking, drugs, loud music, and sexual immorality." Now, someone could hear that and say, "Wait, is that parent making a declaration that drinking alcohol is always wrong in every circumstance for everyone? And is he saying that loud music is somehow inherently sinful?" Well, of course not, right. We would say, "You've got to understand that all of these elements he's mentioned describe a scene of what can take place on college campuses—a lifestyle—where there's all kinds of sinful activity, and he's just saying, 'I don't want you to be part of that lifestyle.'" I think that's the same thing going on here. The Jerusalem council is saying, "Stay away from the temple feasts." This solution not only makes sense of the odd combination of things like food issues and sexual immorality, but it also lines up with what Paul tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10:1-22. After telling them that there's nothing inherently wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols, he forbids them from taking part in the festivals where the meat is sacrificed and eaten. He writes to the Corinthians, "What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is

¹Ben Witherington III, *Torah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 252.

anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Cor. 10:19-20). Again, the issue is venue, not menu.

But this has implications for us as well. Just as it is true that we are justified by faith alone, it is also true that saving faith produces in us hearts that want to obey our Lord, and he demands of all who would follow him that he has our absolute allegiance and that our hearts are aimed at obeying him at all times and in all ways. Therefore, brothers and sisters, it isn't enough to excuse sinful activities by saying, “Well, everyone seems to be okay with watching this on Netflix or doing this on the weekends,” like the Gentile believers might have said about the temple feasts. The question is, “Am I obeying Christ?” And when we realize that he has graciously justified us by faith, how could our hearts long for anything less than absolute obedience to him? Amen.