

Acts 15:22-41

"Be Free & Forgiving"

"What must I do to be saved?" That was the question that came into focus for us the last time we were together. & It's a *great* question; isn't it? We spent the lion share of our time pounding out the answer (hopefully w/resounding clarity). Because there really could be no bigger question that could ever confront us. There can't be any confusion, any ambiguity, any uncertainty that surrounds that question because eternity lies in the balance.

What had happened was some "certain men" from Judea (associated w/the church in Jerusalem) traveled some 300 miles down to Antioch in Syria to teach the message that Gentiles couldn't be saved apart from becoming Jews. Meaning that in order for the sacrifice of Jesus to truly be accredited to your account, you 1st had to become circumcised & adhere to the law of Moses.

Now; for you & me (continents, cultures & millenniums removed) that may sound kind of strange. But the issue is every bit as real today as it was then, it just has a little different hue to it. Today, you might hear something more along the lines of, "Yes, you need to believe in Jesus, but you also need to join 'this' church or else you're not truly saved." "Yes, you need to believe in Jesus but until you're baptized, you're not truly saved." For them, the hang up revolved around the law of Moses. Today, more commonly (though not exclusively, sometimes people still want to bring you under the law of Moses) it's a particular church's set of rules, regulations, rituals or ceremonies.

& Ultimately (though they may not say it exactly like this) what they're telling you is that the cross is great, but it's not enough. There's something more you need to do & once you can check "this" (whatever it may be) off your list, than you can rest assured your saved.

Paul & Barnabas were having none of it. They refused to concede that we could add to, or somehow complete the righteousness of Christ through some work of our own. So they went to Jerusalem & after a heated debate, Peter stood up & reminded them all of the *Revelation of God*. How he'd preached the gospel to Cornelius & his family/friends & having heard they believed & God acknowledged them (demonstrated fully/completely His acceptance of them) by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did the Jews on Pentecost... God's not going to give His Spirit to someone unsaved & unclean... It was obvious; He'd purified their hearts by faith!

Then Paul & Barnabas spoke of the *Confirmation* of God through all the signs & wonders He'd worked through them on their missionary journey, seeing multitudes saved!

Finally, James stood up & gave them the *Validation* of God through the agreement of scripture w/what was happening among the Gentiles... God calling out a people for His name from the Gentiles, just like He said He would. *So the verdict was final; We're not going to trouble those who are turning from their sin & trusting in J.C. by bringing them under the law. Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus alone. It's not about what I do; it's about what Jesus has done. His sacrifice is sufficient to save us.* So they decided to write a letter & send it to the churches in the region of Antioch, Syria & Cilicia regarding the conclusion of the matter, & that's where we pick it up in Vs 22.

Vs 22

Before we move on, I just want to stop here for a minute and draw attention to something worth taking note of. We read that it pleased the apostles & the elders, (notice) *w/the whole church...* isn't that fantastic? They were able (as a body of believers) to come to a unified understanding of this...

Family; let's not forget how passionately persuaded each party was concerning their personal position on the matter at hand! When this Ch begins; we read things like, "no small dispute & dissension". & Again, in Vs 7 we read that there had be "much dispute"... & There's just something to be said for Christians who can at one time disagree & have two radically opposing perspectives on an issue, but they're able to come together in love & be convinced of the truth.

When we're not so set in our ways that we've adopted the position of, "Don't confuse me w/the facts, my mind is made up!" But instead, though we have a passion about our current understanding, we're open to the possibility that there may be other elements that I don't *yet* understand. & We're open to sitting down, seeking the Lord, searching His word & seeing what it says w/in the context that it says it!

A teachable spirit is such a precious thing. It kind of reminded me of Jeremiah 18, when Jeremiah was learning what it meant to be like clay in the hands of the potter. That's us. We're the clay; God is the potter, & it's important to remain pliable, moldable, teachable in His hands. Open to the leading of His Spirit, the illumination of His word...

Be that as it may; they decided to select 2 men to send w/Paul & Barnabas so that they might confirm what was written in the letter. This is wisdom on a couple of levels...

#1 It safeguards Paul & Barnabas. They come back w/a letter & say, “Yep, they agreed w/us!” “Well, imagine that! Of course they did, how convenient of you to bring a letter that agrees w/you...” So, they were able to confirm the authenticity of the letter & the decision. #2 They’re able to inflect the heart behind it on behalf of the leadership of the church. How many of you have ever read a wrong inflection into a text message?

You read it as though they were mad at you, or being short w/you only to later discover that wasn’t the case at all... Silas & Barsabas, would be able to share not only *what* was said, but the heart *behind* what was said as well. The fact that the apostles & elders weren’t frustrated *by* it, or bent out of shape because *of* it, but that they were grateful to be a part of all that God was doing & to see so many coming to J.C.

& I kinda like the fact that one of the men was named “Barsabas”. It means “son of the Sabbath”. Son of the Sabbath was sent to tell these Gentile believers that they were free to rest in the finished work of the cross of J.C.

Vs 23-29

You were wondering if I forgot to address these things weren’t you? (“He said, he’d speak about these things next time, but he didn’t!”) But as you can see, they’re right here, so we’ll touch on them in a minute. ☺

Ultimately; I’d have you see that this was the “final word” regarding the law & it’s position in the Christian’s life. You & me, we are exempt from all “legal obligation” under the law of Moses.

They want it to be made very clear that those men who came up to them & were teaching them that they weren’t saved unless they were circumcised & kept the law, that even though they were associated *w/them*, they were by no means authorized *by* them. “...To whom we gave no such commandment.”

Notice it says that they were “troubling them” w/their words & “unsettling their souls.” That’s a polite way of saying, “We’re sorry that these guys sent you into the ‘spin zone.’” ☺ Think it through; when Paul & Barnabas left (to head to Jerusalem over this matter) there was essentially (at least as far as they knew) a big question mark over their eternal destiny! “Am I saved? Am I not saved?” You’re stressing out, it’s a 300 mile walk there, a 300 mile walk back, let’s say they stay a week in Jerusalem... I mean, you’re not catching to Paul via FB or Snap chat! You’re not texting him to find out what’s going on...

You may as well be on the dark side of the moon! It's been 2 months... Are we saved or not!"

But there's something else I want you to realize here. - This was a letter written to specific congregations, regarding a specific situation. What's written in this letter; not all of it will apply practically to every believer in every age, however the *principle it embodies* will. This was written to congregations where Jews & Gentiles mixed together w/real potential for tension & conflict. What it's going to get at is that there's a right way to interact w/kosher Jews that's not legalism, its simple wisdom...

The 1st thing they want the congregation back in Antioch to realize is that they see & support the validity of the mission & work of Paul & Barnabas (They're beloved, they're men who've risked their lives for the sake of the gospel).

Next they want them to know that they're not just making up the way things went, they've sent 2 leading men from their congregation to verify every bit of it.

Now; look at Vs 28, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit... & to us". Can we stop right there? & Underline those words, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit..." This is such a key when it comes to conflict resolution, or discovering the heart of God behind a certain point of confusion or a question we may have. -

Because believe me when I tell you that there are still "church councils" that get together, large denominational conferences or whatever & they make resolutions or determinations all the time. "Should we ordain homosexual ministers?" & The debate ensues... "Should we marry homosexual couples?" & The debate ensues... This group thinks one thing would be good, another group thinks another thing would be good. People walk out, churches split. But the real question that should be being asked is, "What seems good to the Holy Spirit?"

What's the revelation of the Spirit of God? Where's the confirmation & how is it validated in His word? Some time ago a pastor in our area put out a letter about the stance he was taking & the way he'd be leading his church as it pertained to their position on love & homosexuality & all that... I read it & just thought, "Where are you even coming up w/this stuff? It may seem "good to you" but I *know* it doesn't seem good to the Holy Spirit! There's no validation in the word of God for your position... what does the bible say?" I was talking to a Dr the other day. He was telling me that he's "fasting from church" (there's a concept you won't find in scripture) while he's transitioning spiritually.

But he gets together w/a few other Drs every week & they all feel the same way & they're all asking "the hard questions" trying to figure out what faith means to them.

He told me he didn't believe in hell, that he believed in evolution; he thought that science & the bible couldn't co-exist. & I just said, (because he was trying to figure out what he believed. Almost a modified relativism). So I told him that I respected his desire to really search out & want to know the truth... I exhorted him that the bible says that a man who isolates himself (w/regard to fasting from church) seeks his own desire & rages against all wise judgment. I spoke to him of the fact that Jesus built the church, if we love the Lord we'll love His people, we need to cross-pollenate & minister one to another to promote growth & fruitfulness & accountability in our lives.

But beyond that (w/regard to evolution, no hell etc) I said listen, what really needs to happen is rather than just "believing this" or "not believing that" what we need to come together on is this, "Is the word of God inerrant/infallible & inspired or not?" Because if we both will hold to scripture as absolute truth, we can have a basis from which we learn together. But if you're going to say, "Well, I think it's just a book of good ideas, written by fallible men in a different time to a different people" then we really have nothing to talk about.

Because, who decides what part of the word is truly from God & what parts not? It's either *all* God's word, or it's *not* God's word *at all*. We take it all, nor not at all. But the answers (even to the "hard questions") are found in the word of God. Why not seek it out, find out what the Holy Spirit has to say?

"It seemed good the Holy Spirit, & to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things. That you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled (another way of saying "from blood") & from sexual immorality."

Here we go. The bottom line is that we're free in Christ, but we're not to use our freedom to cause others to stumble. To the Corinthians Paul put it like this, "*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.*"¹

In the ancient world the meat market might literally be on the backside of a pagan temple. They'd sacrifice an animal to some idol, the priest would take a portion of the meat & the rest would go to market.

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [1 Co 10:23-24]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

It was nothing for a Gentile to say, “Man, they were having a killer sale on K.C. strips today down at Zues’ temple!” (Or whatever). But the Jew would be like, “What! If you’re eating meat that’s been sacrificed to a pagan god, you’re honoring that god! Which in reality, if anything is something demonic!” The Gentile would be like, “You’re crazy, it’s good meat, & that’s it!” & It would become a real stumbling block to the Jews, eating meat “polluted” by idolatry...

So the idea is, “You have the *liberty* to eat it, but *love* would say, don’t stumble your brother.” You might write down 1 Cor 8 to read later. Paul addresses this specifically. In Rom 14 he said, *“I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.” Rom 14:14–15*

Today one might argue that it’s not sin to have a beer (taking for granted you’re not an alcoholic). But if it causes your brother or sister to stumble, why do it? That’s not walking in love, that’s flaunting your liberty. It’s just not worth it.

As for things strangled & blood; again, he’s not saying you can’t have a rare steak. He’s saying that when you’re in the company of someone who eats a kosher diet, keep it kosher. God (in the law) taught the children of Israel to honor the blood. *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.”²* So the life of the animal was represented by its blood. The pouring out of the blood & sprinkling it on the altar was the picture of the animal giving it’s life as a substitution for you...

It’s was a foreshadowing of the sacred blood of the Lamb of God (even J.C.) who would shed His blood for you & me. At the last supper Jesus (as He took the cup) said, *“This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.”³* Write it down & look it up later, 1 Peter 1:18-19. Out of love for the Jewish community around them, they need to honor the blood.

As for sexual immorality, there’s a couple of takes on this. 1 is that immorality was so rampant in the ancient world (which is was) that this means exactly what it says. That they needed to be taught to not be engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage.

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Le 17:11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Lk 22:20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

The other (more probable) meaning here is in keeping with the same section of scripture as the dietary law in Lev 17-18. The Jews were taught in the law to stay away from next of kin, or close family as options for marriage (which is common for most people today, but not so much in the ancient world).

So James is saying, “Look, if you want inroads into the ability to share/shine the love of Christ into the lives of the Jews in your community. Don’t be marrying your aunt, or your sister, your 1st cousin... it’s an abomination to the Jews. You’ll turn them away by what would otherwise be viewed as pagan practices.” Again, these things seem like “no brainers” to us, but it’s kind of the way it was in the ancient pagan world.

At the end of it all is the understanding, “You don’t have to subject yourself to the law of Moses, but we’re all bound under the law of Love.”

Vs 30-31

They were stoked to find out that the principle of grace had been preserved & were more than willing to walk in love toward those around them...

Vs 32-35

Things settled back down & they were about the business of doing what we’re doing right here, right now. Strengthening the brethren through the preaching/teaching of the word of God.

Vs 36

Paul had a pioneer’s heart. But he also understood the value *of* & saw the need *for* strengthening & establishing (discipling) those who’d been born again! He had the heart of a spiritual obstetrician (bringing people into the body *of* Christ) & a pediatrician (helping people grow up spiritually healthy *in* Christ).

& I don’t know; a few yrs had gone by, he’s thinking, “I wonder how all those churches that we planted are doing? Let’s go see!” & Often times this is how God will lead us still today. Suddenly a situation, or a need, perhaps an opportunity will tug on your heart. The person next to you may not feel a thing... not because he’s insensitive or unspiritual, but because meeting that particular need is not his calling. God can guide us through individual concern... or a burden for something.

Vs 37-41

Wait a minute! What just happened? Did I read this right? Did 2 giants of the faith just have a fall out that was so severe that they decided to agree to disagree & just went their own way!?

That's exactly what happened! & In some strange way we're comforted by the fact that even apostles of God didn't always have it all together. God used these men tremendously & guess what, they weren't perfect. Maybe God can use me, & I'm certain God can use you...

Paul wanted to go back on another trip; Barnabas said, "Sounds great I'll grab my cousin Mark." Paul said, "Hit the brakes big fella, he's not going w/us." Barnabas said, "Oh, he's coming w/us." Paul was like, "He's not coming anywhere w/me, he bounced last time, left us hanging, cost us money we didn't have to send him back, I'm not doing that again."

Who was right? Who was wrong? One was determined, the other insisted... The truth is they were probably both right, & both wrong. "Sharp contention" is typically an indication of wrong on both sides. Now I want to point this out. This was not a doctrinal issue, it was a personal issue.

But it got so strained that they just divided into 2 teams & each went their own way. We know from the letters that Paul wrote that reconciliation took place, that at the end of his life, Paul was calling for Mark saying he was useful to him for the ministry... But here's the thing. Though God *used this*, bringing good out of it (making 2 missionary teams rather than just one), that's no excuse for division & ultimately these guys had to make things right.

One of the wonderful take homes about this is that even if you've failed in the past; you've had a divisive conflict w/another individual who loves God just like you do; you've done something you ought not do. It doesn't mean God can't use your life, in fact God would love to use you to strengthen others.

However; let me end w/this. That person you've been in conflict with? Forgiveness needs to take place. Listen, I know you're right, you can tell me all the reasons, I get it. Forgive them. Even as God in Christ has forgiven you. If there's anyone who's never done anything wrong, it's Jesus, yes? Yet in this breach that's taken place between us & Him because of everything we've done wrong... Jesus said, "Hey, I'll take the blame, all the guilt, put it on Me." & That's what happened on the cross. & That's what Jesus teaches us in that; that sometimes it's the one who does the *forgiving* who needs to pay the price. & Even as God (in Christ) has forgiven us, so we must do... Find freedom & forgiveness today, at the foot of the cross...

Prayer points:

God search our hearts. Those areas of bitterness or hardness, soften us. Those areas where we've refused to forgive, remind us of *Your* forgiveness toward us, even though we didn't deserve it, You so richly forgave & now who are we to w/hold that from another? Help us God, show mercy to us & lead us in the way; everlasting.

Freedom *in* Christ & forgiveness *from* Christ, they await you today. You can be saved from the penalty of your sin right here, right now. Believe on the Lord J.C. who shed His blood, laid down His life & rose again the 3rd day that you might be made right in the sight of God through faith in Him.