



Good morning. I want to personally welcome all our guests here today! And I'd like to say hello to everyone watching online. I know many of you couldn't make it today or are simply checking us out and we can't wait to see you soon.

Since the beginning of time people have solved challenges and differences **via meetings**. Truly some meetings have altered the course of history. For instance, the friendship of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford or Michael Jordan and Scotty Pippen. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak met in high school and ultimately designed the first apple computer and built the Apple empire. Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Franklin Roosevelt met in 1944 to strategize against the German regime. Think about the first-time jelly met peanut butter and altered the late night dietary plans of every college student in the history of the world.

In just a moment, we are going to read about the most famous early church business meeting of all time. This meeting is so famous it has its' own name, "the Jerusalem Council." Scholars have called this chapter and ecclesiastical gathering the "most crucial chapter in Acts, the turning-point, centerpiece, and watershed moment" in the whole book!

If hope that you have a copy of the Bible. If so please join me in Acts 15. In our time together today we continue our message series in the book of Acts with a message entitled "When Your Tradition Tests God."

[When Tradition Tests God Acts 15:1-2; 4-11]

Customs (15:1) Let's quickly set the contextual stage. Saul, a legalistic Pharisee of the highest order, was radically saved on the highway to Damascus. Saul now Paul believed so strongly in the radical message of Jesus that he reoriented his entire career to become a missionary. They made their way to Antioch (250 miles north of Jerusalem on the Turkey/Syria border) where people were flocking to the **good news**: that Jesus saves you regardless of your previous position or condition. The growth of the church through the Holy Spirit drew the attention of others. So, let's meet these men.

Some men came down from Judea (15:1, 5), not to **congratulate** but to **educate**. What do we know about these men? They were believers and loved the things of God (v.5). We also know they belonged to a certain party, the Pharisees.

Pharisees, as believers in the resurrection, could become Christians without relinquishing their distinctive beliefs: to what they already believed they could **add Jesus** who was Lord and Messiah. **Here is the inherent danger.** If their version of Christianity did not amount to anything more (customs + Jesus), they remained legalists at heart. **Legalists think, “do this and you will love God.”** The **Gospel** proclaims, “the love of God for you produces the love for God in you.” Are you doing for God because of what Jesus already did for you?

We must recognize that we all have inherent customs. Your traditions are not necessarily bad unless they become the **ruling authority** in our lives. **Legalism** left unchecked becomes **lethal**. The more “churched” you are, the more **traditionalism** guides your life. **Martin Luther once said, “The human heart is hard wired for work-righteousness.”** I have personally encountered during my lifetime battles over traditionalism that only **distract us from the gospel**.

Worship Music. **Eph 5:19 speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord.** I can’t remember the last time someone complained that we didn’t have a **Psalm** (customs). Instruments mentioned in Bible: shofar (horn), Cymbals, bells, wooden clappers, shakers/rattles, drums, reed-pipe, lyre (string instrument) or primitive guitar, and harp. I don’t remember the last time someone asked, “please can we have more **cymbal!**” The main thing is this, “**am I making music with my heart?**” Customs, if authoritative, distract us from the Cross.

Bible Translations. I once had a person tell me, “the AV 1611 is the Bible Jesus used.” Traditionalism kept the Bible from being translated. William Tyndale gave his life so that the Bible would be accessible to the common Englishman and prayed at his death that the King’s eyes would open. It was Tyndale’s work that provided much of the translation for the KJV. The power of the Word is that it is available in your language!

Dress Code. Jesus didn’t wear a suit, and I am sure he didn’t wear skinny jeans. Anything I wear that says, “look at me” distracts from my worship of the Savior.

Denominations/church governance/bylaws. I remember as a young person in church a particularly contentious business meeting. I have lost much of the details of this encounter but still recollect it centered around the church bylaws.

I look back at these meetings with tears knowing that we were content to let people die and go to hell as we paused to pontificate our preferences. This is not a young/old debate. We all have customs. **What are you willing to lay aside today so that someone might know Jesus?** What are you not willing to give up so that someone would hear the Good News? **Jesus is the stumbling block, nothing else should be.**

Cross (15:7) After the traditionalists said their peace, Peter stands up. This is the same man who attacked a servant and severed his ear; I imagine he was sitting on his hands during the debate. Peter begins to speak about the gospel and the Cross of Christ. It was Peter’s conclusion from his own experience that God accepted pagans apart from observation of the law.

This is the power of the Gospel! **Jesus did not say “go fix yourself and come back.”** If this is you, Jesus will fix you today. He said, “It is finished.” At the cross of Jesus Christ, **the Father made no distinction**

between people. God does not say Jews in this line and Gentiles over there. No one has a “fast pass” into eternal life or relationship. The Lord does not say Pharisees come to the front, church peeps next, and adulterers you in the back. The Cross calls to all sinners, “come home.” We are all saved the same way, by grace (15:11).

We are naturally prone to gospel forgetfulness. This is why Peter repeats the old old story. This is why we must preach the gospel anew to our hearts daily and constantly. Peter powerful reminds that I am saved by faith by the One who knows my heart. **The faith that saved me, by His grace is not a different sort.** This grace is the same that saves others. **So who am I to grow frustrated at the rebellious sinner.** Oh that I would speak to them of the grace that saved this rebellious sinner.

Grace, Grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse with-in;
Grace grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.

When we recognize that our salvation is due solely to the grace of Christ, we are less likely to place burdensome rules on the backs of other believers. Our job is not to make it more difficult for others to find Messiah. **I want to be a building block not a stumbling block for the Kingdom!**

Collar (15:10) Not only do our preferences fight to distract us from the main things, if unchecked they become burdensome collars for others. And this is exactly the warning of today's Word.

First, be wary when others tell you what God wants for your life. This is not saying that no one has authority in your life. Rather, never confuse the **word of man** with the **will of the Lord**. The Pharisee believers were certain that **it was necessary** for every other believer to become circumcised. “It is necessary” is what we call the **divine dei**. **This was the same phrase most often employed by the lips of the Messiah.** “It is necessary that he suffer many things..” in Luke 17:25. **They used the language of necessity implying that this was God's will.** **Never confuse your words with the divine will.**

Second, we **must not place conditions** on the Gospel, conditions which God himself plainly does not require. Peter calls these traditionalist rules a yoke. The yoke was used as a metaphor for political or social control. Rather than **adding** rules and stipulations we must learn to **rejoice** in the Master's easy yoke for ourselves and for others (Matt 11:29), and celebrate spiritual liberty that no one (not even you) could bear.

This is Peter's lasting impression in Acts, as he now disappears from the narrative of Acts. Peter's words ripple throughout the entire NT, don't strangle the Holy Spirit in others, and don't grieve His work within you.

So What?

We must avoid the drift from reaching those outside to pacifying those on the inside. The moment we begin to look inward is the moment we begin to decay. Gospel- Person-World

We must avoid the drift from grace to law. Legalism is lethal and puts God to the test.

We must avoid the lethal drift from **internal change to merely external behavior**. God knows your heart and sees past your spirit facade.

In 2018 local student went to the zoo, and was surprised when he took a closer look at the enclosure for the zebras. Mahmoud Sarhan was motivated to post what he saw on Facebook, with a photo that appears to support his assertion: the two zebras at the Cairo International Garden municipal park are nothing more than donkeys with black stripes painted on. This was not the first time this accusation was made against the zoo. In the same way, external change w/out a new heart is ridiculous. Many will say to Him, "Lord, Lord" and He will say depart for I never knew you. Are you guilty of painting yourself with "righteous" stripes?

Gospel: God knows your heart and loves you anyway. He doesn't love you because of your religious stripes. Rather, by his stripes we are healed.

Do you feel like you are strangling spiritually? Have you, or others, placed an unnecessary yoke upon your neck? Christianity is not about following rules. It is about following the Way. The Way of the Messiah. The love of God for me produces the love of God in me.

Have you been a stubble block instead of a building block?

Notes

It is no exaggeration to say that Acts 15 is the most crucial chapter in the whole book (BW3, 439).

The Jerusalem council has been described as ‘the turning-point,’ ‘centrepiece’ and watershed of the book (Peterson, 417).

Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.” **2** After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. **3** When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

The main way to resolve such conflict in antiquity was to call a meeting of the ekklesia, the assembly of the people, and listen to speeches. The aim of these meetings was concord or unity (BW3, 450).

Theologically and spatially, Jerusalem is critical for an understanding of Acts 15. Jerusalem is both the source of the problem and the place where it is resolved (Peterson, 417).

Procedure for decision making: discernment, interpretation of Scripture, debate/dispute, and consent or agreement (BW3, 451).

According

This is a dative of cause or rule “because of the custom.” (ECNT, 494)

Acts 15:4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. **5** But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

In other words, they were to be treated as proselytes to Judaism (BW3, 453).

Pharisees

Pharisees, as believers in the doctrine of the resurrection, could become Christians without relinquishing their distinctive beliefs: to what they already believed they could add the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was thus divinely proclaimed to be Lord and Messiah. But if they Christianity did not amount to more than this, they remained legalists at heart (Bruce, 288).

It is necessary

Use of the divine dei. They are arguing that such compliance is a divine necessity. (ECNT, 496). This was the same phrase most often employed by the lips of the Messiah. “It is necessary that he suffer many things..” in Luke 17:25.

They used the language of necessity implying that this was God’s will (Peterson, 423).

Acts 15:6 The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. **7** After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them: “Brothers and sisters, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. **9** He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

It is thus Peter’s conclusion from his own previous experience that God accepted the Gentiles apart from observation of the Law (BW3, 454).

10 Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples’ necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? **11** On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.”

Testing

Putting God to the test is another way of talking about hindering his purpose. Insisting on something which is against his will stretches his patience and invited his judgment (Peterson, 426).

If God accepted those Gentiles and cleaned them in heart and conscience by the impartation of his Spirit as soon as they believed the Gospel, why should further conditions now be imposed on them—conditions which God himself plainly did not require? (Bruce, 290).

Yoke

The term ‘yoke’ is particularly appropriate in this connect: a proselyte, by undertaking to keep the law of Moses, was said ‘take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.’ By contrast with those heaven burdens hard to bear (Matt. 23:4), he and his associates had learned to rejoice in their Master’s easy yoke (Matt. 11:29-30). (Bruce, 290)

Figuratively, the yoke was used as a metaphor for political or social control (Peterson, 426).

They recognized that their own salvation was due to the grace of Christ; were they to acknowledge a different and more burdensome principle of salvation for Gentile believers? (Bruce, 291).

Peter now disappears from the narrative of Acts; so far as Luke is concerned, says Martin Hengel, “the legitimation of the mission to the Gentiles is virtually Peter’s last work.” (Bruce, 291).

Peter concludes his address to the Jerusalem Council with an affirmation that Jews and Gentiles are saved on exactly the same basis through the grace of the Lord Jesus (Peterson, 427).

Illustrations

Human heart is heard wired for works-righteousness (Martin Luther)

Strange and unbiblical church traditions

Worship Music: Eph 5:19 speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

What instruments mentioned in Bible: shofar (horn), Cymbals, bells, wooden clappers, shakers/rattles, drums, reed-pipe, lyre (string instrument) or primitive guitar, harp

Service times: Shabbat always begins on Friday evening a few moments before sunset.

Liturgy

Bible Translations

Dress Code

Denominations/church governance/bylaws

Application

If God showed favoritism you and I would never be his.

The love of God for you produces the love for God in you

Jesus did not way go fix yourself and come back but, "It is finished."