

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

JUNE 20TH–21ST, 2026 // THE BOOK OF ACTS

ARGUMENT AND DEBATE (ACTS 15:1–5)

It is almost impossible for 21st-Century Gentiles to fully understand the divide between Jews and Gentiles in the First Century.

- To Jews in the First Century, Gentiles were idolatrous and unclean. They had different religious practices, lifestyles, and beliefs that prohibited Jews from having them in their homes and fellowshiping with them.

A Gentile could technically convert to Judaism if they underwent circumcision and immersion in a *mikvah* (ritual bath) and fully accepted all the Torah's commandments.

- For a Gentile to become a Jew, they would have had to effectively "renounce" the Gentile world in its totality.
- Conversion was a matter of ethnic realignment.

JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING

In Acts 10, God gave Peter a vision that kicked off the message of salvation through Jesus being extended to the Gentile world.

- Later, the first multi-cultural church was established in Antioch, where Jews and Gentiles worshiped and fellowshiped freely and in unity with one another through Christ.

Paul and Barnabas had been sent from the church in Antioch on their first missionary journey, where they saw many Gentiles come to faith in Christ.

- Some time after Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey to their home church in Antioch, their church became the center of a controversy.

A group from Judea came to Antioch and began teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation (v. 1).

- In a church where half of the members were Gentiles, this was a problem!
- For the Jewish members of this church, accepting that Gentiles could be saved apart from the obligations of the Jewish law was a hard sell.

It was also an issue because there was the question of how Jewish Christians could have fellowship at a table with Gentiles who didn't observe the law and were ritually unclean.

- Paul and Barnabas engaged in serious argument and debate with this group (v. 2)—this was a serious matter the church needed to get right.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

What do we have to do to be saved?

- How should we live after we are saved?
- How do I have fellowship with other Believers who are different from me and who might have different convictions than I have?

There are many different groups that identify as "Christian" and have very different answers to those three questions.

- Some distort "grace" into a license for immorality, sloppy Christian living, and theological anarchy.
- Others insist on rigid legalism, strict conformity to rules/standards, and harsh uniformity.

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IS THE ANSWER

The gospel tells us how to be saved and made right with God, the gospel tells us how to live as transformed disciples after we're saved, and the gospel shows us how to have unity within the Body of Christ.

- God's Word is our standard for these things, not religious traditions or cultural trends.
- After Paul and Barnabas tried to sort out these issues with the group, the decision was made to take these matters before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (v. 2).

- Along the way, they told testimonies and stories of how God had brought many Gentiles to faith in Christ (vs. 3–4).
- But still, many openly disagreed with them.

NO DISTINCTION (ACTS 15:6–11)

When the church faced a doctrinal crisis, they didn't settle it by preference, experience, or majority opinion.

- They sought out the apostles whom Jesus had uniquely authorized.
- Before the New Testament was completed, the apostles served as Christ's appointed, authoritative witnesses.

The teaching of the apostles became the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20) and is now preserved for us in the New Testament scriptures.

- We no longer have living apostles to consult, but we do have their authoritative witness in the pages of Scripture. Are the scriptures our source of truth?

The apostles and elders of Jerusalem convened to consider this matter (v. 6).

- After much debate, Peter stood up and began to explain how God had used him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (v. 7).
- God bore witness to His desire to reach the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as God did to the Jewish Believers (v. 8).

NO DISTINCTION (V. 9)

Christ has come to cleanse the human heart by faith: His sacrificial death on the cross offers us forgiveness of sins, a new heart, a new nature, and a new identity in Him.

- When it comes to this invitation, God doesn't play favorites. The gospel is for *everybody*!
- *Anyone* who comes by faith is saved.

PUTTING A YOKE ON THE DISCIPLES' NECK (V. 10)

In the world of farming, a yoke is a heavy wooden frame that goes around an animal's neck as they pull a cart or a plow.

- The word "yoke" is used metaphorically throughout Scripture to represent servitude, submission, or sometimes bondage, oppression, or slavery.

The early church requiring Gentiles to be circumcised and fully keep the law of Moses would be putting them in bondage and slavery.

- Not only that, but the law was also a burden the Jewish people had never been able to bear.
- The law is good, but who has ever been able to fully keep the law?

SAVED THROUGH THE GRACE OF JESUS (V. 11)

Instead of being saved through keeping the law, the teaching of the apostles is that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

- Salvation is a gift, not a payment for our good works and religious observance.
- We are saved by grace *through* faith, trusting completely in what Jesus has done for us.

QUESTION 1: HOW ARE WE SAVED?

By the unearned, undeserved, radical, unmerited grace of the Lord Jesus.

- We are not saved by keeping the law, religious observance, being a good person, being in church, voting a certain way, or belonging to the "right group." We are saved by grace *through* faith: we fully trust in Christ, not ourselves.

A PEOPLE FOR HIS NAME (ACTS 15:12–21)

SIGNS AND WONDERS (V. 12)

God bore witness to His desire to save and reach the Gentiles through the working of "signs and wonders."

- Just as the resurrection power of Jesus was verified via the working of miracles through the apostles in Jerusalem, it was verified the same way amongst the Gentiles.

Barnabas and Paul began to recount the miracles and mighty works of God that broke out during their missionary journey to the Gentiles.

- Finally, James (the brother of Jesus, lead elder of the Jerusalem church) spoke up.
- James quoted the prophet Amos to remind this council that God's plan had always included the Gentile nations.

JAMES SUGGESTS A VERY WISE COURSE OF ACTION

The group shouldn't lay the burden of circumcision and law-keeping on the Gentiles.

- But for the purpose of preserving unity within the church, the council commanded Gentile Believers to abstain from things that would be offensive to Jewish Christians (v. 20).

These four restrictions didn't save the Gentiles, but they were spiritually beneficial and helpful.

- Paul would later write: "all things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful" (1 Corinthians 6:12, ESV).
- Meaning, as a Christian, just because you *can*, it doesn't mean you *should*.
- If that thing stains my witness or causes other Christians to stumble, I'm to abstain from it.

"THINGS POLLUTED BY IDOLS"

In the Greco-Roman world, meat sold in local markets often came from animals that had first been sacrificed to pagan gods in temple rituals.

- Avoiding this meat protected Gentile converts from slipping back into pagan worship or offending their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. If it has dubious spiritual connections, we're to stay away.

"SEXUAL IMMORALITY"

In Greco-Roman culture, visiting temple prostitutes, engaging in casual affairs, and practicing incest were normal and socially acceptable.

- God's design for human sexuality is for it to be practiced His way: one man, one woman, in the covenant of marriage. Hook-up culture, pornography, adultery/fornication/homosexuality are wrong, no matter what culture says.

"ANYTHING THAT HAS BEEN STRANGLERED...BLOOD"

To eat food that had been killed without properly draining the blood (or to drink blood) was to clearly violate Kosher law.

- Gentile Christians technically had the "right" to eat food that wasn't Kosher, but it was deeply offensive and would have been hurtful to their Jewish friends. We are to lay down our rights as a display of love to other Christians.

QUESTION 2: HOW SHOULD WE LIVE AFTER WE ARE SAVED?

- If we have been truly saved and born again (John 3:3), we have been given a new heart, a new nature, and a new identity that desires to obey and please God.
- We will *want* to live a life of holiness, love, purity, and obedience to God, AND we'll have power through the Holy Spirit to do so.

QUESTION 3: HOW DO I HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHER BELIEVERS WHO ARE DIFFERENT FROM ME AND WHO MIGHT HAVE DIFFERENT CONVICTIONS THAN I HAVE?

- Just because we can, it doesn't mean we should.
- We avoid meaningless arguments/debates.
- We respect differences/convictions from others, even when we don't understand them.
- *"I love you more than I love being right..."*

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IS THE ANSWER

- It doesn't matter who you are, what you've done, or where you've been: if you come to God through faith in His Son Jesus, you will be saved (Romans 10:13), not through works but grace.
- Once you're saved, there is a call to live a holy, set-apart life of love for God and for others.
- *Where do we turn for answers?*