

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

JUNE 27TH–28TH // BOOK OF ACTS

SENDING A LETTER (ACTS 15:22–29) DO NON-JEWISH PEOPLE HAVE TO BECOME JEWISH BEFORE THEY CAN FOLLOW JESUS?

This was the central question of the Jerusalem Council that convened in Acts 15:1–21.

- Some Believers said, “Yes, they must be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law.”
- But the apostles (Peter, Paul, James) concluded that salvation comes through faith in Jesus, not by keeping Jewish religious laws (v. 11).

To the Gentile Believers, the instruction of the council was, essentially, “You don’t have to become Jewish to follow Jesus, but you should leave behind practices associated with pagan worship and live a morally holy life.”

- This helped Gentile converts make a clean break with their previous lives that were connected to paganism, AND it helped Jewish and Gentile Christians share fellowship together.

After this decision was made, the council appointed messengers to return to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (v. 22).

- The two messengers were Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas.
- These two would have provided an eyewitness account of the Jerusalem Council and answered any questions Gentile Believers might have had as to what the letter meant.

The letter was essentially a summary of everything the apostles and elders at the Jerusalem Council had agreed upon.

- God wants us to have clarity on the kind of lifestyle that we are to live as Christians.
- While some “gray areas” might still exist, God’s design for accountability in our lives is the church community and church leadership.
- God isn’t the “author of confusion” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

ISSUE #1: HOW ARE WE SAVED?

The message of the gospel is that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Grace through faith, not of work, so no one can ever boast (Ephesians 2:8–9).
- Anyone who insists on a “Jesus + _____” message is acting in direct rebellion and contradiction to the apostolic witness given to us in this passage of Scripture.

ISSUE #2: HOW ARE WE TO LIVE AFTER WE’RE SAVED?

We are to walk in love and not seek to offend or cause our fellow Christians to stumble. We are to stay away from anything that would taint our Christian witness or hurt our brothers/sisters.

- We are to walk in purity and holiness. We are called to make a clean break from the things we used to walk in before we came to Christ and to abstain from immorality and compromise.

RECEIVING THE LETTER (ACTS 15:30–35)

As the messengers arrived and read the letter to the church in Antioch, the people rejoiced (v. 30).

- Spiritual clarity is cause for rejoicing!
- Judas and Silas, who possessed the spiritual gift of prophecy, decided to stay and continue their ministry in Antioch, rather than returning to Jerusalem immediately.
- When they were sent back, they were sent back with peace by the church in Antioch.

1) It’s an encouragement for our souls to receive the pure message of the gospel.

- A message of “Jesus + _____” isn’t good news. It places an unsustainable burden on our souls that is spiritually exhausting.
- A message of sloppy grace isn’t good news either! It also leads us to slavery to self and sin.
- We’re saved by grace through faith to live holy, pure, set-apart lives of love for God and others.

2) We should all seek to encourage and strengthen others within the Body of Christ.

- There comes a point in our Christian maturity when we should move beyond coming to church just to “consume.” We should show up looking for ways to serve and encourage others.
- How? Getting connected relationally to give, not just receive. Speaking words of life and truth, praying for others, and serving.

3) Unity and peace within the Church is a powerful thing.

- We are never called to sacrifice truth on the altar of false unity, but we are also not to divide the Bride of Christ over non-essential issues.
- “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.” Unity and peace are found when we agree on core doctrines and allow for personal convictions and diverse views in secondary ones.

Above all, we’re to let love govern how we handle our differences and how we treat each other.

- In John 17:21, Jesus prayed for His followers: “May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.”
- In a divided, angry world, the Church is to be a diverse yet deeply unified community that is a testimony of God’s miraculous power.
- How are we working to see that happen?

PARTING WAYS (ACTS 15:36–41)

Some time had passed since Paul and Barnabas’s missionary journey, and it seems that they were enjoying a fruitful ministry at their home church—teaching, ministering, clarifying some doctrinal issues, and resting.

- But after some time had passed, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to the cities where they had established churches and check in on how things were going (v. 36).

Barnabas agreed but suggested that they also take “John who was called Mark” (v. 37).

- There’s some history with this John Mark character.
- Acts 13:13 tells us that John Mark was a member of the first missionary team but apparently left in the middle of the trip for reasons unknown.
- Most likely, it was because of cowardice, fear, or maybe even personal offense because Paul became the leader of the team.

So there arose a “sharp disagreement” between these two Christian leaders (v. 39).

- The concern Paul had was about whether John Mark was qualified to participate in full-time mission work.
- Apparently, he was willing, but was he qualified?
- Biblically speaking, just being willing to serve in a specific ministry doesn’t necessarily make one spiritually qualified (Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–7).

PAUL THOUGHT HE WASN’T. BARNABAS THOUGHT HE WAS.

It’s possible for people who love Jesus, who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and who love each other to disagree “sharply” on the best course of action.

- Apparently, this disagreement was so sharp they “parted company.”
- Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus. Paul took Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia.

WHO WAS RIGHT? PAUL OR BARNABAS?

The text doesn’t tell us—maybe because it does not matter as much as we may think it does.

- Despite their disagreements with each other, Paul and Barnabas kept serving the Lord in ministry, although not together as associates.
- Their division was probably painful, confusing, and heartbreaking for their church, but nevertheless, the work kept going.

The work of the Kingdom is bigger than the personalities of fallen, fallible people.

- People are fallible, broken, and capable of making dumb mistakes and dumb decisions.
- That’s why our faith must be grounded in something so much deeper than loyalty to a certain group of people or a certain leader.
- We must have the maturity to, at times, walk away to preserve unity within the Church.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Paul and Barnabas dealt with the issue at hand in a direct manner.

- Neither Paul nor Barnabas appear to have been acting out of self-interest or self-will.
- Both Paul and Barnabas seem to be acting in accordance with their own spiritual gifts and what they believed was right.
- Yet, they still disagreed and couldn’t resolve it.

WHY IS IT HARD FOR SOME OF US TO DISAGREE?

Ego: An opposing view is seen as a threat to my self-worth and pride as someone who considers themselves fundamentally correct on most things and generally the smartest person in the room.

- Our self-righteous pride assumes the other person sees it differently because they are not as informed, wise, or godly as we are.

Cognitive dissonance: When we hold conflicting views or values at the same time.

- When we’re presented with evidence or facts that challenge what we have believed to be true, there’s an uncomfortable, stressed out, fight/flight response (the alarm in our brain goes off).
- When this happens, we do well to calm down, pray, and listen with humility (Proverbs 18:13).

Identity confusion: Many people confuse their opinions, ideas, and viewpoints with their actual identity.

- When you disagree with an idea they hold, it’s interpreted as a personal attack on their competence and self-worth.
- This is the result of massive insecurity because we are not grounded in Christ.

A SEPARATE PATH DOESN’T MEAN A DEAD END

- Paul and Barnabas disagreed, but they didn’t work to actively destroy each others’ ministries.
- You can disagree on a strategy, method, or decision without completely writing off or slandering that other person, ministry, or church.
- Sometimes, the most peaceful resolution is to bless the other person and agree to live, work, and minister in separate spaces.

A POSTURE OF HUMILITY AND GRACE

- When we assume that someone else’s differing view is simply because they are uninformed, ungodly, carnal, selfish, or “less-than” us, we’re taking a posture of pride.
- What if we’re wrong? What if that other person sees the situation more clearly than we do?
- On essential things, unity. But on secondary issues, lots of liberty, humility, and grace!

PROVING A POINT VERSUS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

- Notice that neither Paul nor Barnabas quit the ministry because of this split; they just multiplied into two different missionary teams.
- We can’t let a personal clash or disagreement sabotage the greater work of God’s Kingdom.
- *Are we fighting to be right and prove a point, or are we fighting to protect what truly matters and make a difference?*

LEAVING ROOM FOR RESTORATION AND FUTURE GRACE

- 1 Corinthians 9:6 was written years after Paul and Barnabas’s separation, yet Paul refers to Barnabas as a fellow worker in the gospel.
- In Colossians 4:10 and 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul explicitly commends Mark, calling him a useful coworker for the ministry.
- Give people time, space, and grace to grow, change, and mature (maybe that’s us).
- *“Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry”* (2 Timothy 4:9–11).

“GO GET MARK...”

- God’s heart is for reconciliation, unity, peace, and love to characterize His Church (John 17:21).
- We would be naive and foolish to presume that these things will happen simply when everyone else comes around and starts viewing things “my way.”
- This takes humility, wisdom, patience, prayer, selfless love, and a whole lot of the Holy Spirit.
- If you’re in a disagreement with someone, are you walking in love, humility, grace, and prioritizing the greater good?
- Or are you walking in pride, self-centeredness, and only thinking about getting your own way?
- Is it right to part ways and give time, space, and grace for the parties to grow, change, and mature? Is it time to reach out and reconcile?