

The Jerusalem Council
Acts #18 | 15:1-35
January 24, 2021

PRAYER | Psalm 119 ¹⁸Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

Introduction | Picking and Choosing

- Trail mix: all the M&M's and raisins are gone, only peanuts and almonds remain
 - Metaphor for our hearts: we pick and choose what we like, ignore what we don't
- Sadly, this is what many people in our culture think about Christians
 - Story: *why do Christians hate gay people?*
- Acts 15 is easy to understand, but it raises this very question. Do we pick and choose?

Big idea: Commitment to Jesus includes commitment to the Scriptures that he taught.

- This is easier said than done...

Jewish-Gentile Controversy

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."

- Already a debate even before Jesus: *how does someone become a worshipping Jew?*
- Them: "It's right there in the Bible, to be Jewish you must be circumcised!"

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 Jerusalem Council

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." ⁶ The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.

- Pharisees who worship Jesus. But they're very conservative. New things scare them.
- They are trying to read the Bible "literally" | missing some larger context

Peter's Speech

⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, 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. 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."

- Peter’s last appearance in the narrative, boy did he get it right!

Paul and Barnabas

¹²The whole assembly became silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Jewish-Gentile Controversy

¹³After they stopped speaking, James responded,

- NOT the disciple James: the brother of John, Son of Zebedee. He was killed back in ch. 12.
- Instead, this is James, the *half-brother* of Jesus | don’t you wish you had more info!

“Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon [**Aramaic form**] has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written: ¹⁶After these things I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, ¹⁷so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles who are called by my name— declares the Lord who makes these things ¹⁸known from long ago.”

- Quoting the prophet Amos | This was always the mission for Israel!

The Ruling

¹⁹Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues.”

- More in a moment!

More Leaders

²²Then the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, decided to select men who were among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men among the brothers.

- Additional witnesses to verify such an important letter

The Letter

²³They wrote: “From the apostles and the elders, your brothers, To the brothers and sisters among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴Since we have heard that some without our authorization went out from us and troubled you with their words and unsettled your hearts, ²⁵we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who will personally report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸For it was the Holy Spirit’s decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements: ²⁹that you abstain from food offered to idols, from blood, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. You will do well if you keep yourselves from these things. Farewell.”

The Letter Delivered

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, and after gathering the assembly, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² Both Judas and Silas, who were also prophets themselves, encouraged the brothers and sisters and strengthened them with a long message. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent back in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas, along with many others, remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord.

The Ruling

...has to do with idol worship

1. Things polluted by idols/what has been sacrificed to idols: obvious
2. From blood: drinking blood was a part of certain pagan worship practices
3. Strangled: the way animals were killed left blood in the body (see above)
4. Sexual immorality: again, likely related to temple practices, but more general as well

...has to do with common humanity | all are PRE-Torah (Noahide laws)

1. Idolatry | Genesis 1 says that humans are “image” of God
2. Sexual immorality | Jesus says (Mark 10) “from the beginning” male/female
3. Blood/strangling | After the flood, Genesis 9, Noah is commanded to not eat/drink blood

...has to do with love and courtesy

1. No unnecessary circumcision. Gentiles do not need to become Jews.
2. No unnecessary offense. Gentiles need to be considerate (Paul in Romans and 1 Cor)

Great! So we can just throw out the Old Testament then, since it has no bearing on us!

- WRONG | Acts 15 ²¹ For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues.

So, I'm not obligated to the Torah, but I still have to hear it and be guided by it somehow?

- YOU BET!

I'm so confused...what is the deal with the Torah then?

- I'M GLAD YOU ASKED

The Torah

1. Torah is not mere legislation | Psalm 119:33-40
 - a. Seven different synonyms (even more when you look at translations): statutes, commands, testimonies, principles, wisdom, promises, word, righteousness.
 - b. Simply “law” is too narrow: stories, teaching, instruction, principles, wisdom
2. Torah is a unity | James 2:10
 - a. Civil, ceremonial, moral | it's sort of helpful, but it's pretty artificial
3. Torah is not one-size-fits-all | Leviticus
 - a. You can't just “point and preach” | men, women, priests, levites, high priest, etc.
4. Torah laws are different from our laws | Psalm 86:11, Romans 13:8-10
 - a. **Psalm 86** ¹¹ Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.

- b. **John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton** When we think of laws, we imagine a normative list of rules with accompanying consequences for breaking them. When a person goes to court, the lawyers, judge, and jury try to determine if the rule has actually been broken and to what extent the consequences should be applied. This system relies heavily on logical precision...We very specifically do *not* want the judge (or the jury) to apply their intuition about what they think constitutes “wrongness” ...People in the ancient world, however, *did* want the judge to apply his intuition about wrongness to the cases he judged and to consider each on its own merits...Ancient legal wisdom [instructed] the judge on what rightness and wrongness looked like so he...would be able to produce rightness and eliminate wrongness with his verdicts...The texts do not teach what the law is; they provide a model for right and wrong so that the judges will know it when they see it.
 - c. **Carmen Joy Imes** Could it be that the laws of Sinai fit this ancient category of “law as wisdom”? I think so...In Old Testament times, the instructions at Sinai would have been understood as the paragon of wisdom—a portrait of a covenant-keeping Israelite.
 - d. **Romans 13** ⁸ Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.
5. Torah is no longer binding covenant | Romans 7:1-6
- a. In the ANE, we have copies of other covenants. Backstory, basis, agreement/obligations, blessings for keeping, consequences for breaking.
 - b. Romans 7 Married to the law until it dies, but now released from the law
 - i. **Jesus fulfilled Torah perfectly**
6. Torah points forward to Jesus | Romans 10:5-13
- a. Everything in the Torah is pointing us forward to the Messiah
 - b. In Romans 10, Paul does some biblical gymnastics, quotes from Lev. 18, Deut. 30, Is. 28, Joel 2, and makes it **ALL ABOUT JESUS** | ⁹ If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
7. Torah is wisdom for living | 1 Corinthians 10:1-11
- a. ¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers [**ancestors, but mostly Gentile church!**] were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea...⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did...¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

So, How Do We Know?

Acts 15 explicitly tells us that some things simply do not apply. But how do we know?

1. Is the instruction related to the nature of creation? (Don't drink blood)
2. Is there something explicitly set aside after Jesus? (Sacrifice in Hebrews)

3. Does the NT explicitly reinforce something from the OT? (Sexual ethics)
4. What did this command mean in their culture? How might it apply to mine?
5. How does this instruction fit into the “big picture” of redemptive history?

Acts 15 Matters

1. Together, we must pursue wisdom
 - a. Our culture loves BuzzFeed, soundbite ideology
 - b. Some things in life require slow, deliberate, and careful thought
 - i. Maybe nothing more so than the OT-NT relationship!
 - c. It's a community project
2. We can't simply say “the Bible says”
 - a. People in our culture say, “who cares?!”
 - b. Instead, we must invite people into a more serious dialogue
 - i. Some will actually want to engage
 - ii. Others cannot be convinced, they just want what they want

Benediction

Colossians 3 ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.