

Acts 091

Freedom

Acts 15:23-29

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Let us take our Bibles this evening and open them to the Acts 15:23, as we continue our verse-by-verse study through the Book of Acts on Wednesday evenings. We are in that section of the book where Luke groups a chunk of material saying that the disciples will be the witnesses of Jesus to the remotest parts of the earth. That is Acts 13-28.

Structure (Acts 1:8)

- Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)
- Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)
- **Remotest part of the earth (Acts 13–28)**
 - 1st missionary journey (Acts 13–14)
 - **Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-35)**
 - 2nd missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22)
 - 3rd missionary journey (Acts 18:23–21:17)
 - Trip to Rome (Acts 21:18–28:31)



It began with Paul's first missionary journey, which we have completed in Acts 13-14. We are coming up quickly on the second missionary journey, which is going to begin in Acts 15:36. Sandwiched in between the first missionary journey and the second missionary journey is the Jerusalem Council, which is not the first Jerusalem Council. The first one was in Acts 11, trying to figure out if a Gentile could get saved. The answer is yes, because of Peter's testimony concerning the salvation of Cornelius.

The second Jerusalem Council, which is what we are studying here, relates to a church matter. What do we do with all these saved Gentiles that got saved in the first missionary journey? Do they have to come under the Law of Moses in order to become members of the church? That is what this whole thing is about here in Acts 15. It is obviously a big step in the birth and growth of the church. That is why Luke, our author, spends so much time on it.

Essentially what happened is that Paul and Barnabas had come back from the first missionary journey to a place called Antioch. That is the city, by the way, up north, where the three missionary journeys will be launched from. Paul goes into southern Galatia, and he comes back to Antioch up north. There came a group into the church, called Pharisees.

A Pharisee is always someone who is trying to add the Law to something. They said, "You have to go under the Law to get justified before God. You have to go under the Law of God to be sanctified as a Christian." Now what they are saying in Acts 15 is, "You have to go under the Law of Moses (that is what I mean by the Law of God) in order to become members of the church. You have to become a full-fledged convert to Judaism." That is what this crowd up in Antioch started teaching.

Paul and Barnabas have to leave Antioch to go down—actually, it is not down; it is always up in the Bible—up to Jerusalem, where the apostles were, to get a word from them about this. Is it true that you have to go under the Law of Moses to join the church as these Pharisees in Antioch were teaching? That is what this whole deal is about here in Acts 15.

Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35)

- I. Occasion (1-5)
- II. Declarations (6-21)
 - A. Meeting convened (6)
 - B. Peter's address (7-11)
 - C. Barnabas' & Paul's testimony (12)
 - D. James' address (13-21)
- III. Decision (22-29)
 - A. Selection of emissaries (22)
 - B. Addresses (23)
 - C. Repudiation of Judaizers (24)
 - D. Approval of Paul and Barnabas (25-26)
 - E. Authorization of Judas and Silas (27)
 - F. Spirit's role in the decision (28)
 - G. Abstentions reiterated (29a-d)
 1. Food sacrificed to idols (29a)
 2. Blood (29b)
 3. Things strangled (29c)
 4. Fornication (29d)
 - H. Farewell (29e)
- IV. Delivery (30-35)

That is the occasion (Acts 15:1-5); the declarations (Acts 15:6-21); the meeting is convened. Peter speaks up. He says, "Us Jews have done a lousy job keeping the Law. Why would we make the Gentiles try to keep something that we couldn't keep?" Paul and Barnabas speak up there in Acts 15:12, and they say, "We saw unusual favor by the Holy Spirit coming upon Gentiles. It had nothing to do with the Law. That was God's pattern all the way through our first missionary journey."

Then finally, the heavy hitter steps up, a guy named James, the Lord's half-brother, the author of the Epistle of James and the pastor of the church at Jerusalem. He says, "You know what? In the Millennial Kingdom—" This is where he quotes Amos 9. He has to quote the Scripture, because in a book where there are constant dreams, constant visions, constant words from the Lord, nothing like that happens here. In order to get a

decision on this matter, they have to go into Hebrew Bible. They cannot go into the New Testament because there is no New Testament yet. That is why James quotes Amos.

He quotes the Millennial Kingdom, and he says, "You know what? In the Millennial Kingdom, Gentiles are going to be full-fledged citizens in the Millennial Kingdom. Since that is the case, let us let the Gentiles into the church now without submitting to the Law of Moses." He reasons from God's purposes in history and the Kingdom that is coming, and he reasons backward to get the mind of God on this issue.

Those are all the declarations. Then what we started last time is now the actual decision is handed down (Acts 15:22-29). We are going to try to complete that little unit this evening, Lord willing.

We have the selection of those who are going to deliver the decision. Paul and Barnabas are going to deliver it to the various churches, along with a couple other guys—one guy named Judas called Barsabbas, and we know almost nothing about him; then another guy named Silas, and we are going to learn a ton about Silas, because Silas is going to accompany Paul on the second missionary journey. Four people are going to deliver this decision from Jerusalem to Antioch. That fits the pattern of the Lord: "Let a matter be confirmed by two to three witnesses" (Deuteronomy 17:6). That is in Acts 15:22.

We pick it up there in Acts 15:23, where the addressees of this decision are mentioned. Notice Acts 15:23, which says:

"And they sent this letter by them, 'The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings'" (Acts 15:23).

Who are the authors of this decision? It is the only people that could make a decision like this, the apostles. Then another group of people called the elders. Who are the elders? The elders are the people that are going to replace the apostles in terms of leaders of the Jerusalem church, because the apostles are not going to live forever.

We first were introduced to the term elders in Acts 11. The elders are not mentioned in the Book of Acts up until that point in time, but there is going to come a generational change. The apostles will not be alive forever, and they are going to be replaced by leadership in the church called elders there in Jerusalem.

This decision has coming from them, and it is coming to—from folks in Jerusalem, elders and apostles—to those up north in Antioch who were being infected by this pharisaical doctrine that you have to go under the Law of Moses to join the church, Cilicia and Syria. That is one of the things I have always appreciated about the Bible. It is one of the things I especially appreciate about Luke, who is so meticulous about places of geography. You can look up all these places on a map and they are real places; they are still in existence 2,000 years later.

As I like to say, when I get to places of geography and Scripture, that is how the Bible was given to us. It is not just a nice spiritual book. It is an actual history book with

spiritual lessons flowing out of it. This is not, "Veggie Tales" or "Jack and the Beanstalk." This is real history with real geography.

The letter is going to a group of people that are called "the brethren." The reason these people are called "brethren" is because they are already saved. This is a dispute that the Pharisees are bringing in to Antioch within the believing community. They are not trying to say, "You have to go under the Law of Moses to be justified before God." That issue was already fixed up there in Acts 11 at the first Jerusalem council. They are not saying, "You have to go under the Law of Moses to grow as a Christian." That issue was fixed in the Book of Galatians, which has already been written at this point, as we have taught.

They are dealing with Christians coming into the church and a group of people saying, "You guys are Gentiles; you cannot come into the church unless you become a full-fledged proselyte to Judaism. You have to be circumcised. You have to do this; you have to do that, according to the Law of Moses." That is the issue that is being dealt with here.

"The decision is being handed down that you, Gentiles, do not have to do that. You do not have to go into the Law of Moses for anything. You do not have to go into the Law of Moses to become a Christian. You do not have to go under the Law of Moses to grow as a Christian. You do not have to go under the Law of Moses to join the church." This is a debate that is happening amongst the saved, and you can see that by the use of the word "brethren."

Then you look at Acts 15:24, and this decision that is handed down by the apostles and the elders is a total top-to-bottom repudiation of the Pharisees, or a group of people that are sometimes called the Judaizers. You see that in Acts 15:24, where the decision is:

"Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls" (Acts 15:24).

That is pretty aggressive. It talks about how certain ones have come in. Who are those certain ones? All you do is back up to the first two verses to see who these false teachers were in Antioch. It says there, you might remember:

"Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren—"

These are the Christians. A Christian can get mixed up in legalism very easily. That is what this group of Pharisees was doing.

"—and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

"Save" there means "grow," because they are already brethren. The word "saved" is used in the past tense, the present tense, and the future tense. Here it is more of a middle tense use of the word "saved."

"And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue" (Acts 15:2).

When Acts 15:24 says that certain men came in and were disturbing you, that is the group that the apostles are referring to. You will notice that this legalism that came in was a disturbance to the believer: *"unsettling your souls"* (Acts 15:24).

That is what false doctrine does; that is what false teaching does.

In essence, one of the things that is happening here is that this false doctrine is coming in. It is causing a disturbance to the Christian. That is what legalism does. There are all kinds of people that will put you under legalism as a Christian, and it will be a disturbance to your soul.

Paul the Apostle dealt with legalism in Galatians 1:6-7. He says:

"I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6-7).

This is one of the reasons we are always to be on the lookout against legalism, false doctrine, people that want to add things to either justification or sanctification or church membership that the Bible does not add. Once you go under those legalistic type teachings, it actually is a short circuit to your spiritual growth. It is a disturbance to your soul.

Make no mistake about it, false doctrine is lethal. It is analogized in the New Testament to cancer, which is a very scary word today, as it should be. Nobody likes to have that name attached to them. I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I am on the up and up now, but it is always a scary thing when that declaration is made about somebody. It is also analogized in the New Testament to gangrene.

The Bible is saying that just as in the physical world, cancer and gangrene are deleterious to your physical well-being, in the same way, legalism, which is always in addition to—something you have to do above and beyond what the Scripture says—is deleterious to your spiritual growth. We do not really look at false doctrine that way. We say that it is just a spiritual thing, but the Bible says it is as deadly to your spiritual man as is something like cancer or gangrene to your physical man.

Second Timothy 2:18, about false doctrine, says:

"Men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they have upset the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2:18).

The word "upset the faith of some," or in some translations "turned over the faith of some" is the same word that is used in John 2:15 concerning Jesus overturning tables in the temple. You remember John 2 when Jesus does this:

"And he made a scourge of cords, and and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables" (John 2:15).

You can imagine Jesus taking a table and physically overturning it. That is the exact same Greek word that is used in 2 Timothy 2:18 of false doctrine coming in and turning over the faith of people. I do not think it is saying that you lose your salvation, but it is a disturbance to your soul in the sense that it short-circuits your growth.

You can, as a Christian, go under false doctrine. A lot of people would say that is impossible, but it is completely possible. The reason I know it is possible is because the New Testament tells the Christian over and over again, "Do not be deceived." Paul, in Second Thessalonians 2:1-3 tells the brethren at Thessalonica to not be deceived by a false letter allegedly coming from him. If a Christian cannot be deceived, why does the Bible tell the Christian not to be deceived? That does not make any sense.

A Christian can be deceived by legalism, and every moment they spend under legalism is a moment they cannot really develop and grow up the way that God has for them. People watch all kinds of things on Christian television, things where people are telling them that they can be rich if they just pray the prayer of faith; or they are taught that there is some kind of little God, that you can command God; or they get in legalistic environments where they are told that they cannot come into the church unless they have their hair a certain way or that a woman cannot wear earrings, she cannot wear makeup, you have got to have your head covered. It just goes on and on and on, adding things that the Bible does not add.

Every moment you spend under that is a moment you cannot develop into the freedom and liberation that God has for you. That is why the apostles here, completely and totally, repudiate the teachings of the Judaizers. What was upsetting to the apostles is that this teaching that they were bringing in, we never authorized.

Acts 15:24 says, *"Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction—"* The Pharisees just came in with their own ideas and started to promote them. The apostles said, "We never gave that instruction." That is how you can recognize false teaching. It adds to apostolic teaching or subtracts from it.

After you have a total repudiation of this pharisaical teaching, now you have the approval of Paul and Barnabas, since they are the ones that are going to take this decision from Jerusalem and go back to Antioch. Notice, if you will, Acts 15:25.

This is something that all the apostles in Jerusalem agreed to.

"It seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul" (Acts 15:25).

Normally it is Paul and Barnabas, but here it is Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas's name is mentioned first, probably because Barnabas was more well known in Jerusalem than Paul. Barnabas and Paul are basically commended as the deliverers of this letter and this decision.

Then you go down to Acts 15:26 and it mentions others. Actually, the others are coming in Acts 15:27, but we have further commendation of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:26. It says:

*"men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"
(Acts 15:26).*

Why are we commending Paul and Barnabas? Because they risked their lives for the cause of the gospel. How did they risk their lives for the cause of the gospel? They went on that first missionary journey that we have studied in Acts 13-14, and their lives were in jeopardy in countless places where they went.

You might remember that there were so many rocks thrown at Paul there in the Lystra and Derbe area, that he was left for dead. They thought he was dead, and he was not dead. He was just unconscious. He went right back into that city and finished his ministry. That is why these men are commended, because they were people that risked their lives.

That really is the definition of leadership, is it not? Who is a spiritual leader? A spiritual leader is not necessarily someone that has the most intelligence or the best education or the greatest spiritual gifting, but it is someone who has the ability to stand up courageously against evil. That is the kind of person that you want to follow as a spiritual leader. That is why Paul and Barnabas are commended here.

Then you go down to Acts 15:27 and two more people, as I mentioned earlier—this is a rehash of Acts 15:22—will also accompany Paul and Barnabas as they deliver this decision. Acts 15:27 says:

*"Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth"
(Acts 15:27).*

We have Judas, and then we have Silas. Judas and Silas are going to deliver and confirm the message; Paul and Barnabas are going to verbally deliver the message. It fits the pattern of God: *"let a matter be confirmed by two to three witnesses"* (Deuteronomy 17:6). In this case, four men are being dispatched from Jerusalem to Antioch.

This whole thing about "let a matter be confirmed by two to three witnesses" is taught all over the Bible. It is in the Book of Deuteronomy concerning those accused of a capital crime. It says:

*"On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness"
(Deuteronomy 17:6).*

You read that, and you can say that that was the whole problem with the trial of Jesus. This rule of two to three witnesses was never used by the Jews. They were trying to rush Jesus through the judicial system to get Him killed as fast as possible. They had one witness that maybe heard Him say something that was not true: "Destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it again in three days" (John 2:19). Someone said, "I heard Him say that He wants to destroy the temple," not understanding that He was talking about His body. That was just one witness, and He was an inaccurate witness. That is what they used to rush Jesus through the judicial system. They did not even follow their own rulebook.

"A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed" (Deuteronomy 19:15).

Then you see this principle in the New Testament. If you want to accuse an elder of something—"I saw elder So-and-so drunk," "I saw elder So-and-so in an inappropriate relationship," or "I saw elder So-and-so looking at something on his phone or his iPad or computer that he should not have been looking at"—you can make that kind of accusation, but you better have two to three witnesses to back you up, because the Bible is clear on that also.

"Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses" (1 Timothy 5:19).

I like that because that protects spiritual leaders from the rumor mill and gossip. A lot of people do not like an elder or a pastor for some reason, and they start a gossiping campaign against him based on slander and libel and lies. This protects the elder from that, but it also helps us understand that elders can sin and mess up. You can remove an elder if you have two to three witnesses. There is a nice balance there.

Elders and pastors are not, invulnerable and invincible and insulated, but at the same time, there is this understanding that a lot of people come into churches with their own agendas, and they start gossiping. Elders and pastors and so forth are protected from that angle. There is a beautiful balance that you will see as you study out this concept of two to three witnesses.

Now, in this case, we have more than three; we have four witnesses. We have Judas and Silas, and Paul and Barnabas. It is going to need that because this is a big decision, and this decision is going to affect the entire church. We are still benefiting from this decision 2,000 years later.

I put this slide up at the very end last time as to who these two are, Judas and Silas.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum says:

"The whole church made the decision to choose men out of their company, meaning members of the church at Jerusalem, to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch so that they could witness to the validity of their report. Two men were chosen. The first was Judas or Judah, who was

also known as Barsabbas, which means 'Son of the Sabbath.' This is the only time he is mentioned in Scripture, and nothing else is known about him. He may have been the brother of Joseph Barsabbas of Acts 1:23."¹

Acts 1:23 talks about a guy that they put forward as a potential candidate to replace Judas, who had committed suicide as an apostle. It says:

"So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (Who was also called Justus), and Matthias" (Acts 1:23).

They made the decision to go with Matthias. This guy here, Judas Barsabbas, could have been the brother of this guy here, Joseph Barsabbas. Other than that, we know next to nothing about this guy. It really does not matter what we know. What matters is that the early church believed in him.

"The second man was Silas, which was his Hebrew name, about whom much more is known. His Roman name was Silvanus."²

You have to understand that in this culture people went by a Greek name, they went by Hebrew name, they went by an Aramaic name, and sometimes they went by a Latin name. Paul/Saul would be an example of that. Peter, whose name is Simon, Hebrew name; Cephas, Aramaic name; Petros, Greek name. It is the same with this guy Silas, who is sometimes called Silvanus. You will see Paul in his writings referring to Silas, sometimes as Silvanus. That is just his Roman name.

"The second man was Silas, which was his Hebrew name, about whom much more is known. His Roman name is Silvanus. He became Paul's company on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40; 16:19, 25; 17:4, 10, 14-15; 18:5). He is mentioned in several of the Epistles (II Cor. 1:19; I Thess. 1:1; II Thess. 1:1; I Pet. 5:12). According to Acts 15:32, he had the gift of prophecy. Judas and Silas were chief among the brethren. They were leaders of the church at Jerusalem. This gave them authoritative standing for what they had to say to the church of Antioch."³

Then you go down to Acts 15:28, and you see the Holy Spirit's role in this decision. This is the letter that is being sent from the apostles that they want read in all of the different churches:

"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials" (Acts 15:28).

Look at that language there: *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."* That is how decisions are to be made in the body of Christ. When churches get about the

¹ Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 326-327.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

business of making decisions, the leadership should seek the mind of God on the subject. If the mind of God is not readily apparent, they should pray about it.

The way our church works is we try to reach some kind of consensus. If there is disagreement on something, we probably have not gotten the mind of God on the topic. Usually if we are confident that it is the mind of God, all of the decision makers, in this case the elders, would be on board with it. It is not one of these things where we want to jam our own opinion through—bare knuckles politics.

That is how the world works. That is how the world makes its decisions. Unfortunately, a lot of churches make decisions that way, trying to solicit opinions and get people on our side or your side or their side; we have to outvote the other side. The world works that way constantly, but that is not how decisions are to be made in the church. The decisions are to be made trying to seek not someone's personal opinion on something, but what is the mind of God on something.

One way to determine that is to ask, "Is there a consensus here?" If there is not a consensus then maybe we should keep praying and maybe we should keep seeking the will of God. This is why churches go astray, because leadership very easily loses sight of this. It becomes a personal thing—"My way or the highway." Then you get hurt feelings and all of these sorts of things when it could all be avoided by saying, "We are not here to do my personal will. We are here to do God's will, and let us see if we can get His mind on this subject." This decision was made by these apostles because *"it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."*

You will notice in the Book of Acts, they do this all the time. The early church, for example, in Acts 20:28, Paul, speaking to the elders at the church at Ephesus, says:

"Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

Paul tells the elders at the church at Ephesus, "The Holy Spirit made you overseers, so you are overseers, not because of a board or not because of a vote, or not because of congregational mobocracy or not because I got my guy in or whatever. You are in that position because the Holy Spirit put you there."

That is what we try to do here at Sugar Land Bible Church. When we select elders and deacons, we try not to say, "It is So-and-so's turn," or "They scratched my back three years ago, I will scratch their back"—all these kinds of anthropocentric, man-centered ways of thinking. It is, "Who does the Lord want? Who does the Lord want in that position?"

What was the decision for?

"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials" (Acts 15:28).

That is what legalism does. It puts on people burdens that do not exist. Do you have to come under the Law of Moses to be part of the church? No, that would be putting on people a burden that God never put on people. Legalists, Pharisees, false teachers do this to people all the time, putting people under burdens that God never placed them under.

This is why the fight against legalism is ongoing. People come in with their own private, man-made 'mishna' or rules, telling people they need to do this or do that when there is no such thing in the Bible. If you can find it in the Bible, that is one thing, but if you are telling people you have to do things this way, and there is no biblical mandate for it in the epistles primarily, which govern the church, then we need to lay off people and let them grow under God, not under our rule book.

Jesus said this in Matthew 11:28-30. He said:

"Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Many times in ministry I will be sweating it out, feeling like I have got a backpack with a bunch of boulders in it. Then the Lord will bring this Scripture to my mind here: *"My yoke is easy and My burden is light"* (Matthew 11:30). In other words, "You have a bunch of rocks in your backpack, Andy, that I never put there." I have to go back to basics. As it says here, I have to go back to the essentials.

John, who probably had one of the closest relationships of anybody, to the Lord when He was on the earth, wrote in 1 John 5:3:

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

What God orders, He pays for. When He tells you to do something, He will give you the power to do it. Now, if you are trying to fulfill someone else's rule book or your own rule book, then God does not empower that because He did not order that. That is many times how you know you are under a false load, because you do not have the power to fulfill it. The reason you do not have the power to fulfill it is because God never required you to do that.

This is a big thing that is happening here with the church. The church is really struggling with legalism to be justified, legalism to grow as a Christian, legalism to join the church. Right here, out of the gate, the apostles are fighting back against that.

Then you go to Acts 15:29 where the abstentions are reiterated. Notice Acts 15:29:

"That you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:29).

Here is where the Bible looks like it is contradicting itself. They just finished saying, "You are not under the Law of Moses." Then it looks like in the next verse he says, "You are under the Law of Moses," because he gives them four things from the Law of Moses to stay away from. "You are not under the Law of Moses, but you are under the Law of Moses. Do not eat food sacrificed to idols, (which is a prohibition in the Law of Moses). Do not drink the blood. Do not eat things strangled. Do not involve yourself in fornication."

This requires an explanation. To me, the explanation is given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, where he says:

"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win the Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without the law, as without the law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that by all means I may save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

What is he saying here? Paul is saying—and he fought to the death on this issue—"You are not justified by the Law. You are not sanctified by the Law. You do not have to go under the Law to be part of the body of Christ." However, the same guy that said all that and did all that and wrote all that went under the Law himself at times.

In Acts 18, as we will read, he took something called the Nazarite vow, which comes from Numbers 6. In Acts 21 that he issued an animal sacrifice, something that he said never adds to the finished work of Jesus, animal sacrifices. Yet there it is in Acts 21:26, he is issuing an animal sacrifice. Then in Acts 16, after telling everybody, "You do not have to be circumcised to grow as a Christian or to become a Christian, or to join the church," he has Timothy circumcised before he takes him on the second missionary journey that is coming up in the next chapter.

"Paul, which is it? Will the real Paul stand up? Paul, are you against the Law or are you under the Law?" I think the bottom line with Paul is that if it removed an offense—because the gospel is offensive enough, is it not? Paul calls the gospel an offense (Galatians 5:11).— If it removed an additional offense, then he would conduct himself in a way where the offense was removed.

He wanted to reach the Jews. It is hard to reach the Jews when you have a lifestyle that disrespects their Law, so he volitionally put himself under the Law to reach the Jews, to take the offense away so he could be a more effective evangelist. I think that is what he is saying to these Gentiles. "You do not have to go under the Law. But you know what? If you are around Jewish people that have a weaker understanding of these things than you have, then you might consider putting yourself under the Law so you can reach

those under the Law with the full understanding that you yourself really are not under the Law."

The example I used last week was of the suit and tie. There are churches that if you do not have a suit and tie on Sunday morning, the people are offended. It is hard to preach to people you are simultaneously offending through your dress code. There are other churches that are very low church. If you put the suit and tie on, they are offended.

One group is offended if you do not have it on, another group is offended if you do have it on. Is there a word from the Lord that says, "Thus saith the Lord, 'The pastor shall have a suit and tie every Sunday morning.'" You are going to be hard-pressed to find a Scripture on that. What do you do in those circumstances? You accommodate yourself to those with weaker understanding. If your accommodation to them is going to give you a platform to preach to them, because you cannot reach people you are offending.

I am in those circumstances. If I am in one of those churches that want a suit and tie on, I will put the suit and tie on. At other churches that do not like it or do not want it, I will not put it on. I basically want people to focus on my message and not my apparel. To me, it is a freedom in Christ issue. You are not in sin either way. At some point, you have to be wise about things; smart about things. Do not do things that are intentionally inflammatory, if it is going to detract from your ministry on that given occasion.

I think that is what the apostles are saying here: "You do not have to do these things to become part of the body of Christ, but [y]ou really ought to stay away from these things when you are around Jewish people or else you are not going to be able to reach them."

What should you stay away from? You should stay away from food sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29), because that violates their law in Exodus 34:15. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:9-10, goes into a whole discussion. Romans 14 goes into a whole discussion about food sacrificed to idols. Should you eat it or not eat it? As a Church Age Christian, you are free to partake of it. If you are under the Law of Moses, you would not be free to partake of it.

You are not under the Law of Moses anymore; you are under a different system called the Law of Christ. What do you do in that circumstance? If you are around someone who is offended because they have a weaker understanding of their liberties than you, then you should avoid it because you do not want to use your freedom in a way that tears someone else down.

This is the thing with alcoholic beverages and things of that nature. Should a Christian partake of alcoholic beverages, not partake of alcoholic beverages? You are going to be hard-pressed to find a "Thus saith the Lord" on that. I can find a lot of "Thus saith the Lord" on drunkenness, but what about casual drinking? Should you do that? It is a freedom in Christ issue. What the Bible is saying is, "Use your freedoms responsibly." Why would you do that in the presence of a recovering alcoholic, for example, where merely partaking of it is destroying that person? That would be a circumstance where you would abstain.

People that are recovering alcoholics come out of that and they have this real rigid rule system for themselves. They know that if their rules are not followed, they are going to be back to where they started, in a drunken state. They want to follow their rules. You know what? You can get into a theological argument with them, or you can just respect their rules as a servant, because you do not want to use your freedoms in a way that are destructive to somebody.

That is the kind of thing that the apostles are dealing with here: "There are all kinds of people out there that have great respect for the Law of Moses, and you do not have to go into the Law of Moses, but you might want to rethink what you are doing if you are in their presence, because it is hard to reach somebody that you are simultaneously offending."

You lay your freedoms aside for the good of somebody else. It is like Jesus, who was the eternally existent second member of the Godhead who lived in total privilege. Yet He laid it aside for a season to become a servant to us. He is our example.

The issue with Paul, the apostles, and James is not "my rights." That is only part of the discussion. Yes, we could talk about our rights and what we can do, but part of that is, are we willing to volitionally lay aside those rights if it is a benefit to somebody else?

Stay away from the "food sacrificed to idols" even though that has zero implication on salvation, growth, and joining the church. Stay away "from blood." I think that means drinking blood. (I do not know why anybody would want to do that, anyway.) A lot of people root that in the Noahic Covenant, the covenant that God made with Noah all the way back in Genesis with the rainbow and everything. There is a provision in it that says:

"Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all it to you, as I gave the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" (Genesis 9:3-4).

That is something to stay away from, based on the Noahic Covenant anyway.

"Things strangled." What if I eat something that has been strangled to death? Is that a big problem? Not for joining the church, not for justification, not for sanctification, but you might be around someone that has a hang up with that. If you are trying to reach them, stay away from that. That provision is in Leviticus 17:13.

Stay away "from fornication." That is Leviticus 18:6-18. This has to do with God's sexual standards. There you see incest condemned and all of that kind of stuff. Obviously you would stay away from that one because that one is forbade, not just in the Law of Moses, but the Law of Christ, which is our system. There is a lot in the New Testament about sexual immorality and staying away from that, but the Law of Christ really is not mentioned here because it is yet to be developed in the New Testament, which has not been written yet.

Here is the main point of the apostles: You are free from the Law, but you might want to put yourself under the Law to avoid an offense. That is the only way I know how to

handle this inconsistency, apparently, in this apostolic proclamation, because he says you are not under the Law, but then he turns around and he looks like he is saying, you are under the Law again.

We have to run it through the grid of 1 Corinthians 9, which had not even been written yet:

"To those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law" (1 Corinthians 9:20).

The whole thing ends with a farewell (Acts 15:29), the very end of the verse:

"If you keep yourselves from such things, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:29),

That is common, like the greeting at the end of Acts 15:23. It says, "Greetings." Then at the end of a letter, as is common, it says, "Farewell." It means "to keep well, to make strong."

That takes us to the end of that decision. Next week we will look at Acts 15:30-35, which is the delivery of the decision from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then we will hit Acts 15:36 that takes us all the way into missionary journey number two, which is going to go from Acts 15:36-18:22. That is where we are headed in the Book of Acts.