



GOSPEL CLARITY AND MEDIUM RARE STEAK
ACTS 15:1-16:5

Church is spreading—Jews and Gentiles are coming in. But for some Jews, there's a problem. These Gentiles are coming to faith in Jesus, but they're not getting circumcised which was the Jewish sign of the covenant. If you don't know what that is ask your parents. So they're not getting circumcised or keeping all the laws. In other words they're being Christian but they're not being Jewish; they're coming to Jesus but they're not coming to Judaism—and that really provides the background for the controversy we're about to look at. Lot's of practical tips here in this passage. **Pray.**

So Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch—the church that sent them out—celebrating everything that God has done among the Gentiles, “**But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1)** vs 5 makes it even more clear, “**It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.**”

This idea is what the entire controversy centers around: What does one have to do in order to be saved— And Paul and Barnabas had been teaching that you have to believe on Christ! But these other folks were essentially saying that in order to be saved you have to trust Jesus and become Jewish—you've got to keep all the Jewish customs and rituals. So, is it trust in Jesus alone? Or Jesus +? —“**vs2 no small dissension and debate with them**” Is it really that big of deal? Who cares about the theology, let's just all love Jesus and get along. It's a huge because the truth of the Gospel is at stake.

Many scholars think Paul wrote Galatians before the Jerusalem council to address this exact controversy that had already made its way into churches he had planted in chapter 14. **8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” (Gal. 1:6-8)** Why is Paul making such a big deal about this? Paul isn't trying to split hairs about theological nuances. He's saying if you believe that you will go to hell. So the Gospel is at stake but also the unity of the church is at stake.

Galatians 2 tells us that theology has infected key leaders in the church. Gal 2 says that Peter—the same guy who ate with Gentiles when they got saved 5 chapters earlier is eating with Gentiles in Antioch and some Jews show up and he backs away and says I'm not with them. And when he did so did the rest of the Jews with him with even Barnabas—the guy who's been going with Paul to the Gentiles stepped away. Quick Leadership lesson: (1) Actions speak louder than words. (2) Things go badly when Peter makes decision based on what people will think. Good leaders choose the right thing over the easy thing.

They're being super hypocritical and when Peter does this Paul confronts him to his face. The text says he stood condemned and his conduct was out of step with the truth of the Gospel. So this is serious man.

You got Jews who claim to represent James saying Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the law, you have Paul and Barnabas (who has apparently come to his senses) saying they shouldn't, and then you have

Peter who eats with Gentiles one second and then doesn't the next. This theology is pulling people in all different directions. We've got to get on the same page about this thing: How is it that people are saved? So they call a conference. We need to pow wow about this. And so they go up to Jerusalem to settle these questions—what does someone have to do to be saved?

So they all gather in Jerusalem Paul Barnabas they're posse, the Jerusalem elders and congregation, and the apostles—it was like a who's who of believers—like Christian comic-con. And Luke records three speeches (1) Peter (2) Paul and Barnabas (3) James and then they make a decision...

And Luke gives us the cliff notes of what each person says. Peter leads off—and he's apparently learned his lesson. He's about to say what's right even though it's going to make him look bad, because he didn't do what was right. Speaking about his experience with Cornelius in Acts 10 he says "8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." He's saying that God saved and placed the Holy Spirit, in uncircumcised not kosher eating not Jewish customs keeping Gentiles. Clearly you don't have to adopt Jewish customs to get saved. So stop telling them they have to—vs 10 don't put God to the test.

Then Paul and Barnabas up next. Vs 12 they declared what God did with among the Gentiles through them. They probably didn't have as much to say here Vs 4 tell us that when they go to Jerusalem they declared all that God had with them.

James—the brother of Jesus. This is the guy who wrote the book of James. James is interesting to me. He was not a believer in Jesus during his earthly ministry. He thought he was crazy. But sometime after the resurrection he came to believe that his brother was God. And shortly after that he became the leader in the Jerusalem church.

But James finishes off the discussion by commenting on what Peter ("Symeon") said. And in vs 16-17 says the reports of God indwelling Gentiles is simply what the prophet Amos had prophesied years ago—that God was going to restore his people through someone in King David's family—a guy named Jesus of Nazareth—and that through him God's promise to bless all the nations of the earth would come true. So what he's saying is in order to come to God, you don't have to come to Judaism you have to come to Jesus—and how do you do that—not by special diets and customs—by faith! So all the speakers are in agreement that faith alone saves...

And then he wraps it up with this in vs "19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood."

4 Abstentions: 3 about food, 1 about sexual immorality. Now scholars go back and forth on what exactly sexual immorality means here—probably has something to do with pagan temple customs that might have some sexual connotation but when it comes to the restrictions on food everyone agrees: no food that's been sacrificed to idols, strangled or has blood in it.

Now folks, let me tell you I love medium rare steak. I love cutting into it and having blood come out, and take my roll and mop it up and eat it. Can I not do that anymore? I believe I can—what's given here is a temporary concession for Jews who would find it particularly offensive...

And the reason is found in vs 21 “For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” God has created a multi-ethnic family and we want everyone to be able to eat together and fellowship. This is going to be impossible if we can’t agree on what we can eat. It’s a concession for the consciences of Jews who have observed dietary laws since God gave them in Leviticus. And there’s a really important principle here that we’ll look at in a second...but I feel like it’s appropriate to say something about these laws—we don’t follow these are any of the other OT laws...High school teacher who said I was picking and choosing. God has chosen!!!

So everyone’s in agreement and they send Paul Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas with a letter they draft in vs 23-29 announcing their decision. And when they read it to the church in Antioch vs 31 says, “they rejoiced because of its encouragement” and this general response as they deliver the news.

15:41 Paul went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches, 16:4 “as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and the elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and they increased in numbers daily.” So I want us to be strengthened by this text. I believe there is some very important practical wisdom for us as we seek to live out and advance the Gospel.

4 Exhortations

When it comes to Gospel freedoms, we show courtesy in our practices.

The council declared once and for all that circumcision and keeping the laws of Moses was not a requirement for salvation. But they tell the Gentiles to keep some food laws. You may think, “Isn’t that win for the Jews?” No! The law of Moses had 613 laws. A lot of the Jews wanted the Gentiles Christians to keep all 613. But the council took it from 613 to 2. “They don’t have to keep any of them, but we’ll ask them to keep two.”

What we see hear is that that they’re really throwing the Jews a bone. They’re saying it’s hard enough that they’ve got to get over the fact that their new spiritual family and have tattoos and where whatever clothes they want—this is a huge sacrifice. We’re telling them to have open hand about over 600 laws, will you have an open hand about keeping two, primarily so yall can enjoy table fellowship together.

What can we learn from this? Well, we learn than just because we can do something doesn’t mean we should. We should be willing to limit our personal freedoms if it’s going to damage someone’s conscience.

One example would be alcohol. There are a variety of good reasons to not drink alcohol. Family history, painful personal experiences, addictive personality. But the Bible never condemns alcohol. And while it warns against drunkenness it presents it as a blessing with Jesus himself consuming alcohol and even making at the wedding feast of Cana—and according to the steward he made the good stuff, not watered down, good stuff.

So, is there anything inherently sinful with drinking alcohol? No. But if you were around someone who struggled with alcoholism it would be grossly inconsiderate to drink. If you were around someone who has alcohol related abuse in the family, don’t do it. Not because you don’t have the freedom to but because you love your brother or sister more than your freedom. Save that for when you’re in a context where you know you’re not going to wound someone’s conscience.

Now, there are some people that aren’t happy with what I’ve just said about alcohol and our text addresses how we approach that as well...

When it comes to non-essentials, we show charity in our disagreements.

Look after the sufficiency of faith alone for the gospel is established, this council is about how people who aren't going to see eye to eye on a lot of issues are going to get along and do life together. Like 600 disagreements right off the bat. And notice, "just go to another church" isn't an option. It's not like they set up a church for people who have tattoos and people who don't or people who eat pork and people who don't.

No we're all together and we're committed to one another not because we share each other's preferences, but because we have the same Father, we're in the same family, and we're going to spend eternity together. Now at times that maybe makes for what JD Greear calls a "tense unity"—or you could just say regular family dynamics. We've all been adopted in a new family through Jesus and that what unites us—not what health decisions you make or whether you let your kids see rated R movies or whether you wear yoga pants. We have people who have strong opinions about that stuff—I've seen your Facebook posts.

And if you allow your personal convictions about things like that to divide the church and fracture fellowship, you're destroying the unity that Christ died to bring and you're in sin. And this is huge over and over again Paul's warns against this: Eph 4:3, "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." 1 Cor. 1:10, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." Rom. 12:16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. **Scott F.**

We may not agree with others but we have to show charity in the non-essentials to preserve the unity that Christ died to bring. Which means I'm not going to treat you as inferior if I disagree with your beliefs—people who voted for Trump and some who didn't. People who drink and some who don't. Some who think medium rare is best and others who wrong. But I'm not going to divide over it.

When it comes to non-essential issues, you may have the opinion that every should this or everyone shouldn't that but when it moves beyond a personal practice to a requirement for fellowship, or a litmus test for faithfulness you're out of step with the Gospel of truth—and you need to repent.

We should contextualize our efforts in reaching lost people.

This is so crucial in our disciple-making efforts. What does contextualize our efforts mean. It means that means if you're in Rome you should do as the Romans do to reach the Romans as long as it's not sin or causing others to sin. This was part of Paul's strategy. Let me show you this...I mentioned earlier that I believe Paul has already written Galatians and given us some background knowledge for this controversy. And in Galatians Paul had a Greek buddy named Titus. And the Jews were saying that he needed to be circumcised to be saved. And as you might imagine Paul says absolutely not, "But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— 5 to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." (Gal. 2:3-5)

To circumcise Titus would be an admission that faith isn't enough—he's taking a stand on salvation by faith alone. Don't have to get circumcised. Argues with the Jews that come from Antioch that you don't have to get circumcised. Argues at the Council that you don't have to get circumcised. And then in chapter 16, when he's delivering the council's verdict to Lystra, he meets up with a guy named Timothy but look

what he does in vs. 3, "Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places" What in the heck? The guy who was just saying circumcision wasn't necessary circumcises him because there were unbelieving Jews there. Is Paul second guessing his theology?

No Paul never said you shouldn't ever circumcise he said you don't have in order to be saved. But if circumcision could help you infiltrate a community of unbelieving Jews with the gospel; if circumcision could help get you in the door so that you could tell them that salvation is by faith alone, then it can be an effect missionary strategy.

D.A. Carson, "If I'm called to preach the gospel among a lot of people who are cultural teetotallers, I'll give up alcohol for the sake of the gospel. But if they start saying, "You cannot be a Christian and drink alcohol," I'll reply, "Pass the port" Paul is flexible...when the exclusive sufficiency of Christ is not at stake and when a little cultural accommodation will advance the gospel; he is rigidly inflexible...when people are saying that Gentiles must be circumcised and become Jews to accept the Jewish Messiah." In other words Paul if people are trying to say that something in addition to faith is necessary for salvation, Paul says no. But if he's trying to win people in a certain context he might dress like they dress and do as they do in order to win them to Christ. This is exactly how he describes his strategy in 1 Cor. 9 look at this:

1 Cor. 9 "20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some

This is a model for us to follow. We should be willing to become all things to all people to win some. Which means we need to be willing to be flexible in our non-essential beliefs in order to reach people. Man I've had to apologize to so many people who said, "I would but you have to not watch rated R and never drink dance or play cards." Someone traded the Gospel for traditional southern Christianity. The gospel is offensive in itself don't make it more offensive by making your preferences additional requirements for Christian faithfulness.

If you add to or takeaway from the Gospel, it's not the Gospel.

These people were trying to modify the Gospel. Trying to add to it. Let's do some math. $2 + \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = 4$ Red
 $+ \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \text{Purple}$ $\text{H}_2 + \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \text{Water}$ $15 + \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \text{Alabama's National Championships}$
 $\text{Faith} + \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \text{Salvation}$

And if you fill in that blank, you lose the Gospel. Saved by "Faith" or "Faith +"—there is an eternity's worth of difference. The Gospel is one of the only things that if you add to it you subtract from it. When it comes to our standing before God, you and I are always going to be tempted to put something in that blank—might not be circumcision and keeping the law but it's something. I see this all the time:

"Faith + Being A Good Person" We're not saved by being like Jesus. Romans 5 says that we were reconciled to God while we were enemies! The reality in this room is that the most righteous actions of most Christlike person in this room Isa. 64 says are like filthy rags compared to God's holiness. We're not saved by being good for Jesus, we're saved because he was good for us—in our place—as our substitute.

Harry getting me backstage—didn't have the credentials to be there. You get to come to God riding Jesus' coattails. We don't have the credentials to be there. We get to come in under his protection and trying to

do it any other way you won't get there. The core of saving faith is finding rest in leaving that blank. Jesus + Nothing + Everything. If you haven't trusted Christ please do this...

Even if you have we need to be reminded of it. Look at Peter and Barnabas. You'll forget it before you go to bed—that God's love for you depends on how well you're doing. Preach it to yourself every day. That's why the gospel is central here. Keller "Gospel is not the ABCs of Christianity. It's the A to Z" We don't go past the Gospel we go deeper into it." Have you trusted Christ?