

## **“A LETTER FROM THE COUNCIL.”**

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**January 24, 2021, 9 and 10:30 AM**

**Scripture Texts: Acts 15:19-35**

### **Introduction.**

Chapter 15 of the book of Acts is the center point of the book, we have crossed the halfway point in this book of 28 chapters. Chapter 15 is also the center point theologically and spiritually. As I pointed out last week, there is a radical shift in focus, leadership, and mission. We are turning from Jews to Gentiles, from works of the Law to grace, from James and Peter to Paul, from Jerusalem to Antioch and to the ends of the earth.

In order to do all of this two important questions had to be answered and settled once for all.

### ***What must a person do to be saved, and what must a saved person do?***

Last week we saw the answer to the first question. What must a person do to be saved? Must they become like Jews, must they be circumcised, must they follow all the Law of Moses?

The answer was a responding no. To put it bluntly, in order to be saved you must do nothing. You can't be saved by something you can do. We are sinners, we are unrighteous, there is nothing good in us, left to ourselves we will never seek or find or follow Jesus.

Salvation is by grace, it is a gift, given to the most undeserving of all of God's creation. Peter ended his speech last week in Acts 15 with this simple creed.

**Acts 15:9-11** [God] made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. .. 11 We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

How do you get into the family of God, how do you get into heaven, how do you become a follower of Jesus? It is a gift given to you by God in which He breathes life into your stone cold, sin-hardened heart by His Holy Spirit, through faith in Jesus.

But then what? Once you are in the family of God, once you have received His salvation, then is there anything we must do? How does my life begin looking different from people who are not saved? What must I give up?

That is the second important question that is answered in our text this morning.

### **Acts 15:19-21, The ruling of James.**

James says it is wrong to burden our Gentile brothers with Jewish practices being added to their faith. But it is necessary to ask the Gentiles to do some things for the sake of fellowship and unity between Jews and Gentiles.

There are certain things that would be especially offensive to the Jews, so out of respect for their consciences, ought to be avoided. What are these four things? “Abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

At first glance they strike us as rather an odd mix of moral concerns and ceremonial concerns? Sexual immorality seems an obvious moral matter, but not of equal importance to the other three more ceremonial concerns.

Why these four? What about all the rest of the Law of Moses? Why not Sabbath observance or some of the other kosher food laws like not eating pork?

Let me give an explanation.

This list of four things are all things that have a strong association with pagan temples and idolatry, idol worship.

As the Gospel leaves Jerusalem and goes out into the Gentile world it runs head on into all kinds of pagan practices. In most of the cities where the Gospel spread there were temples to Greek and Roman gods and the practices in these temples were wicked to the core. At least once a year there would be great festivals to honor and worship these idols.

These temples were filled with temple prostitutes and sexual immorality done under the guise of worshipping idols. Many of these temples were associated with fertility cults. Corinth had a particularly bad reputation for immorality, debauchery, and drunken orgies. There were 10,000 temple prostitutes connected with the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth.

It was like mixing the worst elements of Las Vegas, San Francisco, Mardi gras and spring break. Corinth was the ultimate party town, worshipping Aphrodite, the goddess of love. This is what humans do when they are unrestrained, when they act according to fallen nature.

The temples were the butcher shops of the day. The priest killed the animals and spread the blood and made the sacrifices to pagan gods and sold the leftover meat in the market.

For Jews, the life was in the blood and life belonged to God. They were careful in how they treated it. They killed animals in such a way as to drain the blood out, hence the rules against strangulation.

Since Jews and Gentiles lived in these cities, the request is for the Gentiles to be sensitive to matters that would be repulsive to the Jews.

The apostles were saying to the Gentile converts to Christ, have no fellowship with idols and idolaters. Leave behind your life of pagan idolatry, leave behind the evil, wicked practices of the temples and temple practices. As one person put it, the issue was not the menu but the venue.

In other words there are some things that as Christians we no longer do, that are contrary to God's Word, things that show we have turned away from the world and we have turned toward Christ.

And then there are also some things that while lawful, we ought to be willing to give up for the sake of our fellowship and unity and harmony. It is a Christian virtue to defer to others.

As people saved by grace and living under grace, we show our salvation by graciously restricting our freedom for the sake of others. Are you willing to give up things that maybe permissible for you but a hindrance to someone else? A church that is built on self-sacrifice shows itself to be a church built on the cross of Christ, where He sacrificed everything for our sakes.

Our calling as the church of Jesus Christ is to make sacrifices for the sake of unity, refusing to allow differences of opinion or practice to interfere with the progress of the gospel.

This is a call to love our unity and work to maintain it, not tear it down by petty differences.

### **Acts 15:22-29, The Letter from the Council.**

The council having come to agreement about what should be asked of the Gentiles did two wise things.

They wrote it down in a letter and they sent men to carry the letter to the Gentile churches. A letter by itself could come off as impersonal and subject to misunderstanding.

If Paul and Barnabas had gone back alone their word or authority might have been questioned by those who opposed them. Judas and Silas were from the Jerusalem church, they could convey this decision represented the Jews as well. This was a symbol of unity, solidarity, and authority that would greatly encourage the Gentile church.

The letter is widely regarded as a masterpiece of tact, diplomacy, and wisdom. From the beginning they signal their unity. The brothers in Jerusalem to our brothers in Antioch.

They disassociated themselves completely from the Judaizers, from the party of the circumcision. They made clear they would add no further burdens, except these four reasonable requirements.

By these concessions, the Jews and Gentiles could associate and fellowship with each other, the barriers were removed.

What an encouragement to the Gentiles who in the midst of the controversy were made to question whether they were Christians unless they became like Jews. The burden is lifted, and unity is restored. When brothers dwell together in unity there is much joy, and the church is strengthened.

It is worth noting that though they were asked to leave behind certain things from their past, it was not a burden to them. In fact, their past sins were the burden what weighed them down, and being free from that, they found joy in fellowship with other believers.

### **Implications and application.**

This call is still needed today. Our hearts and our culture are filled with idols, we feel their sinful tug every day. Worshipping idols is inevitable. The very first commandment deals with idolatry. It is the fundamental, foundational sin, the sin from which all other sin flows.

Idolatry is why we do wrong things, why we sin, why we do anything contrary to the Word of God. We never break commandments number 2 through 10 without breaking the first one first.

We sin because there is something we want more than God and His will and His Word.

We have many idols in our lives and in our culture. There are two what I want to call out to avoid and flee from, *sexual immorality and blood*.

*First*, we live in a culture like the first century that does not regard sexual immorality as immoral. It is not regarded as intrinsically evil, as an abomination against a holy God.

Hooking up or living together without marriage is no big deal. Porn is fine, it doesn't hurt anyone. Hollywood portrays sexual immorality freely, calling evil good and good evil.

There is almost a complete absence of shame or remorse with regard to sexual sin, in fact, it is now put-on display with pride. They are excused as matters of personal preference, not matters of serious moral and spiritual consequences.

Whatever makes sin look normal and righteousness look strange is an idol. Sexual immorality is idolatry, bowing to the gods of pleasure, lust, unrestrained desire.

**I Thessalonians 4:3-5** This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.

Do you want to live according to the will of God? Do you pray thy will be done? Do you love the will of God? To turn to God is to turn away from sin. To turn to God is to turn away from idols.

**Ephesians 5:1-5** Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ... 3 But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ... 5 For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

**Colossians 3:5-6** Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

Does anyone tremble at the words of Scripture that the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9-10)?

Be killing sin or it will be killing you. Fight it with all the repentance you can muster, and when you run out, pray, and ask for more. Relentlessly pursue godliness and persistently avoid worldliness.

What do you need to leave behind? What habits are soul depleting? What movies, video games, phone apps? What steals your joy in Christ, your faith in Him?

**Second**, as our culture is obsessed with sexual immorality, so also culture is obsessed with blood, the blood of innocent children, which we remember on this Sanctity of Human Life Sunday.

**Abortion** is the willful shedding of innocent blood, the taking of life from a human being made in the image of God. In Scripture it rises above other sins and is called an abomination. It ought not to be defended, advocated, promoted, encouraged, voted for, or winked at.

Abortion is not just political issue or a women's rights issue. Abortion is a great evil perpetrated by the evil one. Abortion is part of Satan's great plan to steal, kill and destroy.

The hand of God's judgment is upon our nation, it should not surprise us. For 48 years we have witnessed the slaughter of over 60 million of our children. It is deeply disturbing to hear politicians and news media wring their hands over the number of deaths from Covid, or cancer, or tragedies like the 5 or 6 who died at the capital, but give no acknowledgement, not a word of the tens of millions of deaths of babies.

It has been with us so long, we are jaded, we don't think about it, pray against it, stand for truth in our culture. We don't think about the lies we are told. When the news tells us what is the greatest cause of death in our nation, we don't hear the lie, forgetting nearly 4000 thousand a day die from abortion. When we hear the news tell us abortion rates are dropping we don't hear the lie, that chemical abortion rates are climbing, the so-called morning after pills or Plan B pills.

We live in a culture that is wearing us down, normalizing sin, normalizing abortion, it is common place, it is acceptable, there is no turning back the clock. It's just a statistic. Whatever makes sin look normal and righteousness look strange is an idol.

We must guard our hearts against anything that sets itself up contrary to God's Word. I preach lest we forget or get numb or don't care anymore. Fight against every attitude that is against children.

We must continue to ask God to forgive us all and our nation for our great national sin of abandoning and killing our unborn children. We must beg His mercy for our callousness and our excuses.

We are a people under judgment, and if we are at all wise, we will cry out for mercy and help. We won't arrogantly go on pretending everything is alright or will be OK.

We must tremble before a God who is just and righteous and who hears the cry of the blood of the innocent.

How do we pray for a pro-abortion president? By praying that God will change his heart and that God will deliver him from the lies of our age for the sake of his own soul. That's love, that we care enough about him that we pray for the truth to break into his heart and that he will be rescued from perishing.

If you have opportunity, please speak up on behalf of the innocent ones in the wombs. They have no voice, they can't defend themselves against attackers, they can't vote. Speak up and be their advocate for life.

In 2019 in my sermon on this day I said, maybe someday God will enable us to have a fund set up with money specifically to help couples who want to adopt but can't afford the huge costs. Well that day has come. God bless the deacons of our church who established an adoption fund.

**Matthew 25:40** And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

As the letter says, "If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

**Prayer:** Almighty God, have mercy on us as a nation and turn aside your wrath against us. We have shed innocent blood because we do not trust you and do not fear you. Almighty Father, convict our hearts of this great wickedness that threatens the very soul of our nation. Give us a great love and compassion for the littlest ones among us, especially those in their mother's wombs. Change the hearts of Christians everywhere to no longer be silent and passive. Jesus, you conquered death on the cross and delivered us from death, come now and conquer this death and deliver us until there is life, liberty, and justice, not just for some, but for all. I pray for those who have had abortions that you silence the lies of Satan that there is no forgiveness or relief from guilt. This morning break down those barriers to your love and forgiveness. You died to set us free from all our sins.

Finally Father, I pray for your blessing upon all the families of our church, upon those with children still in the home, and also on those who desire children and are waiting on you. And for those who desire to be married that they might have a family. Father, hear their prayers and answer according to your best wisdom and will and give us patience as we wait on you. Come Holy Spirit, come, have mercy, and help us we pray. Amen.