

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

The Liability of Jesus + Legalism

Acts 15:1–35

Take your Bibles and turn with me to Acts 15. When we last saw Paul and Barnabas, they were in Galatia getting terrorized by the people. It was an odd turn of events. First the Lystrans wanted to worship them. But then the people were persuaded into throwing rocks at Paul in an effort to kill him. And so far in our study of Acts, we have seen the lives of Paul and Barnabas (and others) threatened. But today, it's not the lives of the apostles that are threatened... it's the truth of the gospel message that is threatened.

And what we'll find today in the text is that Paul and Barnabas are willing to let their bodies be destroyed for Christ. They are willing to be beaten, bruised, bloodied, scarred, and marred for the gospel without fighting back. But they *aren't* willing to let the gospel be beaten, bloodied or bruised. They *aren't* willing to let the gospel be marred. They *aren't* willing to let the gospel be polluted, or perverted. They won't fight for their own self-preservation, but they will fight for gospel-preservation.¹

And the attack on the gospel comes from a surprising place in Acts 15. It doesn't come from superstitious pagan Gentiles in Galatia. It comes instead from “old school” Judaizers.

Now just by way of personal transparency, I'll let you in on something. If you didn't know this before, I'm declaring it now publicly... your pastor is not very technologically savvy! I'm old school. In fact the truth is I'm a little technologically challenged. Now I've gotten better over the years. But I still struggle. And it's sad because my dad was a software engineer. My brother is CIO for a small company. They are both incredibly savvy with computer software, hardware, and technology. But that “computer-savvy” gene must've skipped me. I'm old-school.

And not just with computers and technology. If I weren't married to Sanja, I'd still be wearing the baggy jeans and baggy clothes of the 1990s. I still have some of my clothes from that era just in case baggy clothes come back in style again. I can't wait for that to happen.

Some of you are like, “1990s? I'm still waiting for the 1970s to come back, Pastor Tony. I've still got my polyester suit in storage. Can't wait for that to come back in style. That's old-school.”

Now here's the thing. There's nothing wrong with “old-school” most of the time. There might even be some benefits to being old-school with some of the stuff I'm talking about. If you're old-school with technology and your flip phone... no problem. If you want to wear your polyester suit to church here at Messiah Bible Church... no problem. But there is a place in Scripture where ‘old-school’ becomes a problem. In our passage today, Acts 15, “old-school” isn't just a problem, it's heresy.²

¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23: “If the apostles had capitulated, there would soon have been a ‘Christian’ doctrine of ‘salvation by circumcision’ and ‘The First Church of the Circumcision.’ Similarly, today we must withstand false doctrines of baptismal regeneration and salvation through sacraments.”

² HEINRICH BULLINGER: “Just as that evil one sows his bad seed in the field of the Lord, so the Lord constantly tests his people with various afflictions. So far he has tested them with a variety of persecutions; now he tries them with a variety of heresies. Heresy is worse than persecution. For it afflicts and undermines people's souls after their bodies are torn apart. However, since heresy is inserted for the good of the church, thus it is allowed to crop up for the greatest good of both the genuine and the faithful.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 206.

When custom takes the place of confidence in Christ alone, then we've got a problem. When legalism starts infringing on liberty, we've got a problem. When ritual takes the place of imputed righteousness, that's when "old-school" becomes problematic.³

And this isn't just a problem for the first century church. Legalism is something we've got to deal with all the time in order to protect the purity of the gospel.

So here's the situation. The last few weeks we've looked at Paul and Barnabas's journey through the Gentile world. People are getting saved. Churches are getting planted. Elders are put in place to rule over the churches. Here's a map of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey.



Paul's First Missionary Journey⁴

There are churches in Cyprus. There are churches in Pisidian Antioch and Pamphylia. There are churches in Galatia (Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe). Setting up those churches was no easy task for Paul and Barnabas. Nevertheless they're about to face one of their toughest challenges in **Acts 15** back in Jerusalem.⁵

Now if you remember from last time, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch where they had been sent out from. And at the end of **chapter 14**, they declared all that God had done with them on their missionary journey. And **verse 28** says they remained no little time with the disciples in Antioch. Things were going great in Antioch as Paul and Barnabas recounted all that God had done on their missionary journey. The church was joyously celebrating.⁶

But as they were doing that, look at **chapter 15, verse 1**:

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers,

Here it is, right here. Here's the "old-school" legalism that threatens to corrupt the purity of the gospel.⁷ "Unless you are circumcised⁸ according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."⁹

³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 420: "As in the first century, the issue of people wanting to do something to earn salvation and the church adding to a list of conditions for salvation has been a continuing problem."

⁴ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁵ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 315: "The church council in Jerusalem falls between the first and second missionary journeys of Paul... any further missionary activities by Paul would have been impossible until this specific issue had been resolved permanently."

⁶ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 29–30: "Acts 14 ended with Paul and Barnabas recounting God's glorious work among the Gentile nations. The good news of the gospel had spread throughout the Mediterranean world. This celebration, however, came to an abrupt halt when false teachers infiltrated the church and sought to squelch the flames of joy kindled by Paul's testimony (15:1)."

⁷ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23: "Things were going well — too well for the enemy's taste, and the inevitable satanic counterattack soon came."

⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 321: "The more conservative Jewish Christians felt that they should be received on the same basis that Jews had always accepted Gentiles into the covenant community—through proselyte initiation. This involved circumcision of the males and all proselytes taking upon themselves the total provisions of the Mosaic law. For all intents and purposes, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism became a Jew, not only in religious conviction but in lifestyle as well. That was the question the conservative group of Jewish Christians raised: Should not Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to share in the Christian community? It was a natural question. The first Christians were all Jews. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. God had only one covenant people—the Jews."

So, let me summarize here. The church in Antioch is like, **“Hallelujah. Gentiles are getting saved. They’re getting saved here in Antioch. They’re getting saved in Galatia. Christ’s mission is being accomplished.”**

But these Judaizers come in and say, **“I’m sorry, that’s not true. Faith in Christ is not enough. They need to get circumcised.”**¹⁰ **You need to get circumcised!”**¹¹

And the church at Antioch is like, **“Really? Circumcised? That’s sounds.... Inconvenient!”**¹² **Is that really necessary?”**¹³

Now let me say two things about this before we move on. **(1)** From this point on, I’m going to use the term “Judaizers” for this sect of the faith that wants to circumcise.¹⁴ A Judaizer is someone who tries to combine OT law with NT faith. It’s someone who tries to syncretize Old Covenant Judaism with New Covenant Christianity. They try to impose “old-school” on the New Covenant that Christ has established for us. And in doing that **[listen to me, this is so important]** they try to syncretize salvation by faith and salvation by works.¹⁵ That’s a perversion of the gospel! That insults Christ and what he’s done for us on the cross! Paul said it this way, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” **(Gal 2:21).**¹⁶ So you know that Paul’s not going to stand for this in Antioch.¹⁷ We’ll get to Paul’s response in a moment.

But let me say this as well. **(2)** These Judaizers who came from Judea **(verse 1)**... they didn’t have the backing of the church in Jerusalem. James makes that clear in **Acts 15:24**. They weren’t authorized by the church leaders in Jerusalem. They were rogue.

It wasn’t like Paul and Barnabas who were sent out with the blessing of the church in Antioch. That church laid hands on them. They prayed for them and sent them out by the power of the Holy Spirit. These Judaizers were operating on their own authority. They weren’t sent out by the Holy Spirit. And they were not functioning under the auspices of church authority. They were rogue! **If you remember, I said a few weeks ago that I don’t trust people who operate as rogue agents outside the auspices of church authority. Watch out for those guys! Here’s a case in point right here with these Judaizers.**

So, look at **verse 2**.

Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. Jews had always demanded of all Gentile converts the requirements of circumcision and rituals of the Torah. Why should that change?”

⁹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 61: “They could not conceive that pagans could simply enter the church and immediately be on an equal basis with Jewish believers. That seemed unfair to those who had devoted their lives to keeping God’s law. They feared, too, that in an increasingly Gentile church, Jewish culture, traditions, and influence would be lost.”

¹⁰ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 316: “The false teachers picked on the brethren, meaning the Gentile believers, because they were not circumcised.”

¹¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23: “These were the kind of ecclesiastical wet blankets who can listen to the testimony of a new convert and say, ‘Well, that is okay, but there is something more that you must do before you have the whole package.’”

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 323: “There were many Gentiles in the church at Antioch (cf. 11:20f.). There is no indication that they had been circumcised when they joined the Christian fellowship.”

¹³ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 63: “They no doubt also refused to eat with the Gentiles (cf. Gal. 2:11ff.) and therefore would not fellowship with them in the Lord’s Supper. Their teaching and actions posed a grave threat to the truth of the gospel (cf. Gal. 5:2–6), as well as to the unity of the church. The danger of a split between Gentiles and Jews was real.”

¹⁴ They are called “the circumcision party” in Acts 11:2 and Galatians 2:12. See also (much later) the reference to the “circumcision group” in Titus 1:10.

¹⁵ MARTIN LUTHER: “They saw that however many works they did, still their conscience could never have rest... The more it does, the more tired it becomes. Yes, it is oppressed by even a single work, that for it the world is far too narrow, continually goading it and saying, ‘Do, do, do.’ It does not cease to goad until through God’s grace we see that this doesn’t work. Grace must accomplish this rest; otherwise it will never happen.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 209.

¹⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 501: “Salvation is through grace by the work of Jesus. What this implies is that salvation is not through works of the law, as the complaining group from the Pharisees would require. The reference to the grace or gift of God is placed forward in the Greek construction for emphasis. God’s grace as it relates to the Lord Jesus has opened the way for both Jews and Gentiles to experience God’s blessing. This comment gives no place to the law in terms of salvation (Gal. 5:6).”

¹⁷ CHRYSOSTOM: “Likewise Paul says in the epistle to the Romans, ‘For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to glory in, but not before God.’” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 183.

² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them,

I love the way that Luke puts this: “[they] had no small dissension and debate with them.” In other words, they debated a lot with these Judaizers. They fought against this perversion of the gospel. And when they apparently reached an impasse, they decide to consult with the church in Jerusalem.

Let’s stop here and state a first principle from this text. Write this down as #1 in your notes.

1) Jesus plus legalism **perverts** the gospel (15:1–5)

Jesus plus nothing equals everything. Solus Christus. Jesus plus legalism perverts the gospel.¹⁸

Look what it says next in **verse 2**.

² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem¹⁹ to the apostles and the elders²⁰ about this question.²¹

So, Paul and Barnabas travel some three hundred miles from Antioch southward towards Jerusalem. I know the text says they “went up” to Jerusalem. That’s confusing for us because we think north is up and south is down. But that’s a geographical orientation not a topographical orientation. Antioch is about 250 feet above sea level. Jerusalem is about 2,500 feet above sea level. So they don’t go down to Jerusalem topographically; they go up.

But before they arrived in Jerusalem, look at **verse 3**.

³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

So not everyone is negative about uncircumcised Gentiles getting saved. The Samaritans rejoice. The Jews and Gentiles in the Phoenician churches rejoice. They don’t assume that the law of Moses is binding on these new believers.²²

Look at **verse 4**.

⁴ When [Paul and Barnabas and their entourage] came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.²³

So Paul and Barnabas tell their story again. They told it in Antioch. They told it in Phoenicia and Samaria.²⁴ These stories never get old. **“Hey Paul, tell that story about when you got left for dead in Lystra.**

¹⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 30: “The Judaizers attempted to add something to the gospel, resulting in the formula *Jesus + works of the law = salvation*. This formula exists today. Catholics believe in Jesus plus the keeping of the sacraments as necessary for salvation. Others teach that Jesus plus good works of morality will gain you salvation. Anything, however, which attempts to supplant the complete sufficiency of Christ’s atonement sacrificing amounts to heresy and a false gospel.”

¹⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 323: “Jerusalem was the ‘mother church.’ The apostles were there. It was the suitable site to debate such an important issue. It is unclear who appointed Paul and Barnabas and ‘some other believers’ to represent Antioch in Jerusalem. The Western text has the Judaizing group summoning Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem ‘to be judged.’ More likely the Antioch church appointed them as its official delegates to the meeting. Paul mentioned that Titus accompanied him and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1), so he may well have been one of the ‘others’ of Acts 15:2.”

²⁰ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 66: “After receiving the men from Antioch, the apostles and the elders came together privately with them to look into this matter of salvation. The leaders, not the congregation, would decide this explosive and potentially divisive issue. And even they were able to arrive at a decision only after there had been much debate.”

²¹ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 29: “Acts 15 chronicles the first council in church history. Several councils stand as pillars of doctrine and theological clarification. The Council of Nicaea in 325 sought to elucidate the nature of Christology. In 381, the Council of Constantinople convened to discuss further Christological issues which emanated from the proceedings in Nicaea. The topic of human nature summoned church leaders to another council at Ephesus in 431. The 451 Chalcedonian Council sought to settle issues which flowed from the council at Ephesus. Each of these councils convened over issues of orthodoxy and the dissemination of heretical doctrines in Christendom. False doctrine assailed the church, and its leaders met to protect that faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3)... Much like these ecumenical councils which marked the first centuries of the church’s history, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 convened over vital matters central to the gospel. Acts 15 teaches us the importance of doctrine and sound teaching. The church in its infancy came under the assault of false teaching. Luke will recount for us in this pivotal chapter the conviction of the apostles and their steadfast theological fidelity. Indeed, Acts 15 distills the danger of doctrinal capitulation: a tainted gospel is no gospel at all. A proclamation of good news laced with heresy will, like a drink mixed with poison, kill the hearer.”

²² JOHN CALVIN: “Because circumcision was, as it were, the solemn initiation into all the other rites of the Law, therefore, by synecdoche, the whole Law is included under one part.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 206.

²³ Some equate Acts 15 with what’s described in Galatians 2:1–10. I am more persuaded by those who connect Acts 11:30 with Galatians 2 (so also Schnabel, Fernando, Bock, Bruce). See Schnabel’s timeline in Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 620–1.

And then you went back into the city! That was awesome. Tell that story about when you struck that sorcerer blind in Cyprus and then Sergius Paulus got saved.” I bet Paul and Barnabas never got tired of telling those stories.

But look at **verse 5**. Not everyone is celebrating what Paul and Barnabas are saying.

⁵ But some believers²⁵ who belonged to the party²⁶ of the Pharisees [i.e., “Judaizers”] rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”²⁷

So let me set this up for you. Paul and Barnabas are telling incredible stories about God saving Gentiles. Everyone is rejoicing and celebrating what God has done. But these young believers, these pharisaical pencil-pushers are like, **“O yeah, well, you need to tell those Gentile heathens to get circumcised and keep the Law of Moses.”** Seriously? You just heard all these incredible stories about people getting saved and all you can think about is circumcision and the Law of Moses! I’m not sure whether to be angry at these guys or pity them for their pettiness.²⁸

Now two things about these guys: **(1)** Luke calls them believers. Did you see that in **verse 5**? So we’re not dealing with unbelievers here, just a misguided group of probably baby Christians. And these baby Christians are still dealing with an underdeveloped theology of salvation. Does that happen sometimes when people come to Christ? That their theology is underdeveloped? All the time. Discipleship is a process, and nobody is born again and then immediately starts theologizing like John Calvin. It’s a process.

And we should rejoice in the fact that these Pharisees got saved!²⁹ Right? Some of them may have even argued with Jesus before his death. But these Pharisee converts are still dealing with reminiscences of their Judaism that hasn’t been exercised yet from their system. And probably they are still struggling with bigotry towards Gentiles.³⁰

But secondly, I will say this. **(2)** These guys are called believers by Luke, whereas the Judaizers in **verse 1** aren’t called believers. Luke just says, “some men came down from Judea.” Hear me on this – some Judaizing in the NT is the result of ignorance by misguided believers. Those believers need to be corrected, just like other misguided believers in other areas. But some Judaizing is the result of unbelievers promoting a false religion. The Bible calls that second category “wolves.”

Some of this “old-school” is ignorance. Some of it is “deception.” Some doctrinal error is the result of ignorance by misguided believers. Those believers need to be teachable, and they need to be corrected.

²⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 324: “It could almost be described as a ‘campaign trip,’ since most of these congregations would likely be sympathetic with their viewpoint that Gentiles should not be burdened with circumcision and the Torah. This would be especially true of the Christians of Phoenicia whose congregations were likely established by the same Hellenists who reached out to the Gentiles in Antioch (11:19–20).”

²⁵ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 64: “The Pharisees of verse 5 are different, however, since the text describes them as having believed. They did not argue that circumcision was necessary for salvation, but that believers were still obligated to keep the law. To them, circumcision and keeping the law were not a means of salvation, but obedience required after salvation.”

²⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 496: “The term ‘party’ (αἰρέσεως, *haireseōs*) refers to a distinct subgroup that has distinct beliefs (BAGD 23 §1a; BDAG 27–28 §1a). It is not a pejorative term here equal to our sense of heresy (correctly, Witherington 1998: 453n381). The term is used descriptively of the Sadducees in Acts 5:17, of the Pharisees in 26:5, and of the Christians in 24:5, 14 and 28:22. All of this suggests that Luke presents Christianity as a natural extension of Judaism because promises given originally to the Jews are now offered in the new community formed by Jesus the Messiah.”

²⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 496–7: “Acts 15:5 restates the problem introduced in 15:1 but with more detail (also Gal. 5:2–3, where Paul argues that circumcision, if it is observed as part of the law, requires that all the law be observed for salvation). Circumcision is a key part of the law but is not all of it for Pharisees.”

²⁸ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23: “These Pharisaic Christians were not intrinsically evil. If they had worn horns, it would have been so much easier. They had genuinely come to know Christ, and their faith had cost them dearly. But they were also the product of their upbringing.”

²⁹ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 31: “The fact that Pharisees repented and believed in Christ should give us cause to rejoice and praise God for his grace.”

³⁰ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 64: “Although both groups manifested legalism, these believing Pharisees were different from the Judaizers of verse 1. Clearly, the latter were not true Christians, since they taught that circumcision was required for salvation. By thus mixing human works with faith they nullified grace (Rom. 11:6).”

But some doctrinal error is the result of wolves who are preying on sheep. That's the result of unbelievers promoting a false religion.³¹ Those wolves need to be confronted and escorted out of the church.³²

So what happens next? Here's a great idea. Let's let the leaders of the church look into this matter.³³
Look at verse 6.

⁶ *The apostles and the elders were gathered together³⁴ to consider this matter.³⁵ ⁷ And after there had been much debate,³⁶ Peter stood up and said to them,*

Alright, this is going to be good. I love Peter. And unfortunately this is Peter's swan song in the book of **Acts**. This is the last time we hear from him. And his statement here is so precious. Listen to this:

"Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe."³⁷

Peter's talking here about his interaction with the Gentile Cornelius, who was a Roman soldier.³⁸ Remember that whole incident in **Acts 10**? That was about ten years before this. And it was during that time that God said to Peter, **"Don't you call unclean, what I've made clean, Peter."** **"Don't you do that."** Peter remembered.

Look at verse 8.

⁸ *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,³⁹*

The Holy Spirit descended on Cornelius and his family just like he did on Peter and his Jewish friends at Pentecost.⁴⁰ It was a sort of "Gentile Pentecost" at Cornelius's house. It was God's way of saying, **"They are with you, Peter. And you are with them. What's in you (the Holy Spirit), is in them!"⁴¹** No more partiality.

³¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 316: "Today, certain groups teach another heresy, namely, that believers are not saved until they have been baptized. Both statements are equally wrong. Both involve salvation by works and salvation through ritual."

³² CHRYSOSTOM: "You have received as your patrimony the desire never to allow the teachings of our faith to degenerate into heresy... They sprang after the wolves and did not let up chasing them and driving them away." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 187.

³³ In this case, the leaders of the church also include the Apostles, namely Peter, Paul, and James. Whether or not the other NT Apostles were in Jerusalem at this time is unclear. Luke doesn't reference them by name.

³⁴ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 415: "If the visit mentioned in Galatians 2:1–10 preceded the council, the issue had already been settled by Peter, James, and John, 'those reputed to be pillars' (Gal. 2:9). Yet when the issue came up again, time was given for 'much discussion' (v. 7). The theological controversy was not swept under the carpet and allowed to simmer; it was brought into the open and fearlessly discussed."

³⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 498: "Luke summarizes what is certainly a much longer discussion."

³⁶ JOHN CALVIN: "Although eminent men and the public teachers of the church were chosen, not even they could agree among themselves at once. It is clear from that how even at that time the Lord troubled the church by the human weakness, so that it might humbly learn to be wise." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 208.

³⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 416: "If this council met after the humiliating confrontation in Antioch where Peter was publicly rebuked by the younger Paul (Gal. 2:11–21), as we think it did, it is indeed creditable that Peter should be the first to get up and speak on behalf of Paul's side in the controversy. This is typical of the honorable commitment to God's truth rather than to personal preferences and prestige that characterized the attitudes and behavior of the leaders at this council."

³⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 499: "Peter makes a key address with a review of his experience with Cornelius, the third time Luke has recounted this event, indicating its importance (Acts 10; 11:1–18)."

³⁹ BEDE: "That is, it has pleased the Holy Spirit, who, appearing as the arbiter of his own powers, 'breathes where he wills' and speaks the things which he wishes." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 191.

⁴⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 500: "The Spirit was given to them just as it had been given to Jewish believers at the beginning, an allusion to Acts 2 (11:17)... What is important here is that God gave the Spirit without any circumcision being done. God accepted Gentiles as they were when the Spirit came. The theological implication here is that the Spirit would not have come to indwell Gentiles unless they are completely accepted and cleansed."

⁴¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 320: "God knew the heart of the Gentiles, and He testified of their faith by giving them the Holy Spirit... The fact that the Holy Spirit had been given to these Gentiles showed that God had accepted them by grace through faith, apart from circumcision and apart from the works of the law, just as He did with the Jews. Therefore, God gave the Holy Spirit by grace through faith, without distinction... Both Jews and Gentiles are sinners, and both Jews and Gentiles are saved in the same way: by grace through faith. Both receive the Spirit on the same basis. They receive the cleansing of their hearts not by works, not by ceremony, not by ritual, but by faith."

No more ethnocentricity. No more racial or ethnic divisiveness. This is the body of Christ made of Jews and Gentiles both.

⁹ and [God] made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts [by law?... No...] by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, [this is great rebuke right here listen to this] why are you putting God to the test⁴² by placing a yoke⁴³ on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we⁴⁴ have been able to bear?⁴⁵

Wow, that's a great statement. Peter's saying, **"Jesus saves! Jesus is sufficient. The law pointed us to Christ. Now we have Christ! Why would we want to go back to the law? Are you crazy? Even we can't fulfill the law! Why would we make *them* do that?"**⁴⁶

Peter's on a roll. Preach it, Peter! Look at **verse 11**.

¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."⁴⁷ ¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Write this down as #2 in your notes. 1) Jesus plus legalism perverts the gospel, but also...

2) Jesus plus legalism **burdens** new converts (15:6–12)

The famous DTS professor, Dr. Howard Hendricks, said once, "I repudiated legalism intellectually and theologically years ago. But I still struggle with it emotionally."⁴⁸ **That's probably true for a lot of us.**

You can't add anything to the Jesus for salvation. I don't care if it's circumcision or OT laws or Christian customs or political persuasion or dress or other standards of conduct. Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

This is not a minor theological point. This is not theological wrangling over a secondary or tertiary issue. The stakes are absolutely huge with this. And there's no disagreement between Peter and Paul on this matter.

And if we mess this up... If we pervert the gospel by adding "works" to "grace" ... than we risk perverting the gospel and leading people to hell. We've got to get this right.⁴⁹

And just FYI, I believe that Paul authored the book of **Galatians** just before he left for Jerusalem to settle this issue with the other apostles and leaders.⁵⁰ (There's some debate about that, but I think that's the best

⁴² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 327: "How could Jewish Christians demand anything more than the faith already shown? To demand more would be to put God to the test, to act against God's declared will, to see if God really meant what he had already shown in accepting Gentiles apart from the law."

⁴³ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 320: "Peter declared that to challenge Gentile salvation was to put God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the Gentile believers. Galatians 5:1 confirms that the law was indeed a yoke."

⁴⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 320: "Why should they have to bear a yoke that even the Jews could not bear, neither their ancestors nor this present generation? The point Peter made was: 'Why force these Gentiles to do what we ourselves could not do?' That is, in fact, what they would have done by requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised. To demand this would have had two results: First, it would put God to the test; and second, it would put the disciples under an unbearable yoke."

⁴⁵ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 33: "Peter exposes the hypocrisy of the Jews who would dare to place the burden of the law on Gentiles when the Jews themselves had failed to keep the requirements of the law (v 10)."

⁴⁶ MARTIN LUTHER: "In summary, neither the pope nor an angel from heaven has authority to bind the conscience with a law. But over the body, not only does the pope have power, but even each one of us has power to make a law if it is useful to our neighbor on account of love. Also each person is responsible to his neighbor. Love is the sum of the law. According to the heart you are free; according to the fist you should behave as other people behave. When you enter into a city, conduct yourself like other people. Thus, you are free *and* subject to every person; first in conscience, second in body." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 214.

⁴⁷ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 33: "Peter makes clear in Acts 15:9–11 that the gospel has torn down the dividing walls between ethnic groups. The new covenant began a new era in redemptive history in which all peoples from all nations and all tribes enjoy the salvific promises fulfilled in Christ."

⁴⁸ This is a paraphrase from what's quoted in Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23: "said, 'I repudiated legalism intellectually and theologically in 1946, but in 1982 I am still wrestling with it emotionally.'"

⁴⁹ MARTIN LUTHER: "Works may and ought to be performed, but as long as the conscience does not depend on them and does not place its trust in them. Instead, works are freely performed to honor God and to help our neighbors. The conscience must depend only on faith, on the Word and on the grace of God... Now wherever it is, it never fails that heresy and sects spring up. Even from the beginning of the world the archheresy which we call Pelagianism, concerning free will and the merit of our works, has followed this true instruction. It has always interjected itself and sticks to the true preaching like muck on a wheel." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 204.

⁵⁰ See Schnabel's timeline in Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 620–1. Schnabel dates the writing of Galatians at AD 48. See the intro sermon on Galatians at <https://www.messiahbible.org/galatians-awol-from-grace>.

way to put the historical chronology of these two books together). So the issues in **Galatians** are very much the same as what we're dealing with here in **Acts**. You'll see the connections if you go read that book, or if you go listen to that series at Messiahbible.org.⁵¹

So this is a doctrinal issue of the utmost importance. But besides the theological reasons why Jesus plus legalism doesn't work, there are practical reasons why Jesus plus legalism doesn't work too. And one of them is that it unreasonably burdens new converts.

This was Peter's point in **verse 10**.

... why are you putting God to the test

By the way, "putting God to the test" was a big no-no in the Jewish world. You don't do that! So Peter's accusation has teeth here.⁵²

... why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

"We couldn't bear this burden as Jews. Why do they have to? It's cruel what you're doing!" By the way, it wasn't like they could just go get circumcised and be done with it. Paul says in **Galatians**, that whoever accepts circumcision as necessary for salvation is obligated to keep the whole law (**5:3**). That's a lifelong, burdensome yoke!

But Jesus said instead, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (**Matt 11:28–30**). The law *isn't* gentle and lowly of heart. The law *isn't* easy and light. The law is a taskmaster. It's meant to reveal our utter sinfulness, so that we might turn to Christ.

Here's the application point. Make sure that you don't overwhelm new believers with law when they get saved—biblical law or otherwise. Make sure you don't overwhelm them with a bunch of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots" when they first get saved. Give them an opportunity to change by grace.⁵³ Let the Holy Spirit do his work.

Full disclosure, I've got to fight that temptation all the time. "O yeah, you got saved, did you? Terrific! First you need to do this, this, this, and this. Then you need to do this, this, this, and this." And we pile things on them. I've been guilty of that.

Let's not do that. Just ease off the gas a little bit. God's got a hold of them. Let them change by the grace that God gives. God took care of you when you were a new Christian. God's got them.

Even with some of the premarital counseling that Sanja and I do, I've got to fight that temptation to get in there and fix everything. And point out every flaw. And point out every potential issue that they'll struggle with. And in my better moments, I'll stop and remember—did I have it all figured out when I got married? No! Did God take care of us? Yes. We had to grow in grace.

When you got saved, did you have it all together? No. I didn't either. Give new converts a chance to grow by grace.

Now if someone's been a Christian for fifteen years, and they don't go to church, and they never crack open their Bibles, then that's another matter.

So, Jesus plus legalism perverts the gospel. Jesus plus legalism burdens new converts. What happens next in **verse 13 and following?**

Well we've heard from Peter. We've heard from Paul and Barnabas. We presumably have heard from the Judaizers, and they just got an apostolic smack-down from Peter. So now what? Well now we hear from James, Jesus's half-brother, who has become one of the most prominent figures in the Jerusalem church. And

⁵¹ <https://www.messiahbible.org/galatians-awol-from-grace>.

⁵² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 500: "Peter now strengthens his point and asks rhetorically, 'Why do you test [τί πειράζετε, *ti peirazete*] God?' This is really a declaration not to test God. God has revealed himself and shown how Gentile hearts are now cleansed without circumcision. The idea of testing God is a strong warning, as it is used in Exod. 17:2"

⁵³ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23: "Grace is risky and can be abused but must not be rejected."

that's really quite shocking when you consider that James used to think his big brother Jesus was crazy (see **Mark 3:21; John 7:5**). James was not a big fan of his big brother's messiahship until after Jesus's death.

But after Jesus's death, and after he saw the resurrected Christ, James was transformed (see **Acts 1:14; 1 Cor 15:7**). And he became one of the strongest leaders in the early church.⁵⁴

And it's amazing here that he speaks after Peter. He gets the last word in all this.⁵⁵ And maybe the Judaizers were like, **"O yeah, now we're going to get exonerated by James. This guy is a real Hebrew!"** But what does James say?

Look at **verse 13**.

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me." ¹⁴ Simeon

I love that. James doesn't call Peter "Peter" or "Simon" or "Cephas." He uses the most Jewish form of his name that he possibly could. He calls him "Simeon" because he was named after Jacob's son Simeon. Simeon was the second son born to Jacob, born to him by Leah.

Sanja and I will refer to Alastair as Alastair Benjamin Caffey. But when we want to emphasize his Croatian-ness, we call him Alastair Benjamin [pronounced *Ben-ya-men*]. That's what James is doing here. He's emphasizing Peter's Hebrew-ness.

¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people⁵⁶ for his name.⁵⁷ ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree,⁵⁸ just as it is written,⁵⁹ ¹⁶ "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old."⁶⁰

James quotes here from **Amos 9:11–12**.⁶¹ He wanted to link the recent developments with the Gentiles with biblical revelation. In other words, he sought the Scriptures to discern what was happening.⁶² And in the Scriptures it says, "all the Gentiles who are called by my name" will seek the Lord. They'll be a part of the kingdom that is restored when Christ returns.⁶³

⁵⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 328: "Paul also mentioned James's role at the Jerusalem Conference (Gal 2:9; cf. 1:19) and called him one of the 'pillars' of the church, along with Peter and John. James had evidently become the leading elder of the Jerusalem congregation. His leadership of the church has already been indicated in 12:17."

⁵⁵ JOHN CALVIN: "The impudence of the pope is clearly refuted by the fact that the decree of the council is determined by the authority of James rather than of Peter." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 211.

⁵⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 502: "The term 'people' (λαός, *laos*) is significant because it often refers to the people of God (Acts 7:34; 13:17), as it does here. In the OT, this term refers to Israel (Deut. 26:18–19; 32:8–9; Ps. 134:12 LXX [135:12 Eng.]), although Zech. 2:11 (2:15 LXX) uses it to refer to Gentiles as a part of renewed Israel."

⁵⁷ CHRYSOSTOM: "'To take out of the Gentiles,' he says, 'a people for his name'—not simply 'he chose' but 'for his name.' That is, for his glory. His name is not shamed by taking the Gentiles; indeed, all the greater is his glory. Here something truly great is hinted at, that these are chosen before all." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 187.

⁵⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 503: "James now notes how the teaching of the prophets matches or agrees with the inclusion of the Gentiles. The verb συμφωνοῦσιν (*sympōnousin*) literally means 'share the same sound,' and thus 'match' or 'agree' (BAGD 780 §1a; BDAG 960–61 §1)."

⁵⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 330: "From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles."

⁶⁰ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 323: "God intended *from of old* (v. 18) to allow for Gentile salvation, and now He finally made it a reality."

⁶¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 503: "The reference to the prophets is important. James's point is not just about this one passage from Amos; rather, this passage reflects what the prophets teach in general, or what the book of the Prophets as a whole teaches. Other texts could be noted (Zech. 2:11; 8:22; Isa. 2:2; 45:20–23; Hos. 3:4–5; Jer. 12:15–16)."

⁶² Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 324: "The rabbis took Amos 9:11–12 as a Messianic passage. One of the rabbinic names for the Messiah is *Bar Naphli*, which means "son of the fallen one." The name comes from the Hebrew word *hannopelet* in Amos 9:11. Lightfoot provides a translation of *b. Sanhedrin* 96b-97a, which explains the connection: "Rab. Nachman said to R. Isaac, ... *Whence art thou taught when Bar Naphli will come?* He saith unto him, ... *Who is this Bar Naphli?* The other replied, 'It is the Messiah.' 'Dost thou then then call the Messiah Bar Naphli?' 'Yes,' saith he, 'for it is written, In that day I will build again the tabernacle of David ... *hannopheleth, falling down.*'" (Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae Et Talmudicae*, Vol. 4, p. 126)."

⁶³ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 33–4: "James issues an edict and decides the doctrinal matter. He does so, however, in a surprising way. He grounds the salvation of the Gentiles not in Paul's testimony or Peter's vision but in the Old Testament (v 15–17). James, therefore, comes to understand the Gentiles' inclusion in God's people as the fulfillment of a prophecy long ago declared in the Hebrew Scriptures. He quotes from Amos 9:11–12 (for a similar theme, see Jeremiah 12:15). In so doing, James recalls the very voice of God,

Sounds good. Everyone agrees at this point. But what about circumcision and the law?

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble [i.e., annoy]⁶⁴ 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,⁶⁵ and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

Now here’s what James does. I want to be clear about this. James affirms everything that Peter and Paul have said. He agrees that Jesus plus legalism perverts the gospel. He agrees that Jesus plus legalism burdens new converts. He says as much in **verse 19**,

... my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,

But James is also concerned about the unity of the church. The legalism of the Jewish Christians will alienate the new Gentile believers. But if the Gentile believers fly off into license and assume that they can do whatever they want irrespective of their Jewish brothers and sisters, that’s going to alienate the Jewish segment of the church. Do you see the issue here? Do you see what James is trying to do?

And so here’s what James does. He proposes a compromise. He suggests a solution that will protect the unity of the church. And it’s a good compromise between Jews and Gentiles.⁶⁶

Here’s how the compromise works. James says essentially, **“You Pharisaic Jews, quit hassling the Gentile converts about circumcision. You’re alienating them with your Jewish customs. You’re making Jewish customs necessary for salvation. That’s not necessary for salvation! Salvation is by grace alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone. So stop unfairly burdening them with your Jewish customs!”**

But he’s also saying this: **“And as for you Gentile converts, don’t alienate your Jewish brothers by practicing certain Gentile customs... some which are blatantly sinful (e.g., sexual immorality).”**⁶⁷ Here’s a list of things that we want you to abide in order to not alienate your Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.”⁶⁸

So let me summarize what James is doing with one simple statement—James is protecting the unity of the church.⁶⁹ He’s telling both Jews and Gentiles, **“Don’t let legalism or license sow discord and divisiveness in the church.”**⁷⁰

who spoke through the prophets his plan of redemption, which would rebuild the house of David with a new remnant—a multitude of people from all the nations.”

⁶⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 505: “The verb *παρενοχλέω* (*parenochleō*) means ‘cause unnecessary trouble or difficulty’ (BAGD 625; BDAG 775; *EDNT* 3:38). This is the term’s only occurrence in the NT. It appears in the LXX in *Judg.* 14:17, where it refers to Samson being bothered by Delilah, and in *1 Macc.* 10:35, where it describes the pestering of Jews during feasts.”

⁶⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 505–6: “The reference to things strangled is also rare, being absent in the LXX. The verb *πνίγω* (*pnigō*, strangle) appears in *Matt.* 13:7; 18:28; and *Mark* 5:13, where it refers to plants choking other plants or to pigs drowning. This likely is a description of what happens with sacrifices or meals among Gentiles. The result of this form of death is that blood often is not drained from the animal (Gaventa 2003: 222). Philo (*Spec. Laws* 4.23 §§122–23) describes such a practice.”

⁶⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 70: “With the major doctrinal issue resolved, James turned to practical matters of fellowship. He and the other leaders were concerned not only that the Jews not trouble the Gentiles, but also that the Gentiles not trouble the Jews. The danger was that the Gentiles, reveling in their freedom in Christ, would pressure the Jewish believers to exercise that same liberty and violate their consciences.”

⁶⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 419: “The prohibition of sexual immorality (*porneia*) seems to belong to a different category from the rest, and it appears out of place in this list. Surely it goes without saying that sexual immorality is prohibited for Christians. I think that there was so much immorality in some of these places, like Antioch (which was notorious for its immorality), that the churches were also affected by the immorality surrounding them. Therefore a special warning was necessary. Perhaps this prohibition was implying that immoral church members should not be extended the privilege of table fellowship with Christians (cf. *1 Cor.* 5:9–11). This explanation would then tie in this prohibition with the other three.”

⁶⁸ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 421: “The cause seems to have been to open doors for evangelism among unbelieving Jews rather than to appease believing Jews.”

⁶⁹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 419: If there was going to be openhearted fellowship between the Jewish and Gentile Christians, there would have to be some sensitivity to Jewish scruples by the Gentiles.”

⁷⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 507: “There is a cultural sensitivity here where the issue is not establishing a fixed set of practices but respecting the practices of others and not forcing oneself on another because of such views... They display a cross-cultural concern that leads to harmony. Nonetheless, Paul in *Rom.* 14–15 expresses a similar type of cross-cultural concern, so that the spirit of what is invoked here can be seen in the self-styled apostle to the Gentiles as well.”

Write this down as #3 in your notes. 1) Jesus plus legalism perverts the gospel. 2) Jesus plus legalism burdens new converts. Thirdly...

3) Jesus plus legalism or license **hinders** church unity (15:13–35)

Jesus plus legalism... or Jesus plus license [licentiousness if you will]... hinders church unity.⁷¹

Look at **verse 22**. Let's finish this passage up.

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

In other words, **“Forget those Judaizers that went to Antioch last time. Those guys weren’t from us. We’ll send some of our own people this time. People they can trust. Men that can speak for us.”**

They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,

By the way they didn’t send two idle men who were just sitting on the shelf. **“Hey, let’s put these guys to work; they’ve got nothing to do.”** That’s not what happened. And neither were they rogue agents operating outside the auspices of the church. They sent leaders. They sent disciplers. They sent capable, trustworthy men.

And they sent the following letter with them. Look at **verse 23**. Luke, as a good historian, records the actual document that was sent to Antioch.⁷²

²³ with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers⁷³ who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard⁷⁴ that some persons have gone out from us and troubled⁷⁵ you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit⁷⁶ and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” ³⁰ So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

So just to be clear here, they are telling the church in Antioch, **“You don’t have to be circumcised. Don’t worry what those previous guys have told you. They’re not with us. They’re rogue. They weren’t sent by church leaders.”**

“But we do want you to do the following... not for your salvation, but in order to maintain unity in the body of Christ: 1) abstain from food sacrificed to idols, 2) abstain from eating blood, 3) abstain from eating food that has been strangled, and 4) abstain from sexual immorality.” Abstain from these things not because your salvation depends on it, but because we want you to be free from those things

⁷¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 332: “Morality was not the issue at the Jerusalem Conference. Fellowship was, and the decrees were a sort of minimum requirement placed on the Gentile Christians in deference to the scruples of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ... there are Jews in every city who cherish the Torah. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel.”

⁷² Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 37: “The fact that Luke records the entirety of the letter demonstrates its theological significance for the early church. Writing books or letters in the ancient world bore a tremendous cost. Each and every word added to the total cost of producing letters. Luke could have merely summarized. Instead, and at a cost, he records the whole letter. Like a good historian, he records in detail the primary sources crucial to his narrative. He wanted the contents of the letter reproduced and preserved in full detail, ensuring the survival of the letter’s message and the continuation of its significance.”

⁷³ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 327: “The very fact that the authors of the letter addressed the Gentiles as ‘brethren’ shows they had accepted them as fellow believers. These were Gentiles who remained uncircumcised, but they were brethren, nonetheless.”

⁷⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 334: “Verse 24 provides some additional clarification concerning the Judaizers of 15:1. They may have come from Jerusalem, but they were in no sense official representatives of the church. In fact, the language of the letter expresses some dismay with this group. They are described as “troubling” (literally “plundering” or “tearing down”) the minds of the people in Antioch. The word was a military metaphor (*anaskeuazō*), meaning originally to plunder or loot a town. The Jerusalem leadership was obviously not happy with the wholly unauthorized Judaizers and their so upsetting the Gentiles of Antioch.”

⁷⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 512: “The verb ἐτάραξαν (*etaraxan*) here means ‘shake up’ or ‘disturb’ someone (BAGD 805 §2; BDAG 990). It is used of agitating a crowd in Acts 17:8 (also Gal. 1:7). The result is an ‘unsettling’ (ἀνασκευάζοντες, *anaskeuazontes*) of their souls.”

⁷⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 328: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, meaning the conclusion just reached by the Jerusalem church was the work of the Holy Spirit... This was a fulfillment of John 16:13, where Yeshua promised that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all the truth.”

that could jeopardize the unity of your church (e.g., the sin of sexual immorality and other stumbling blocks that are not necessarily sinful like food sacrificed to idols, strangled food, and blood).”⁷⁷

Here’s the letter in a nutshell: “Jews stop hassling your Gentile brothers, and Gentiles don’t stumble your Jewish brothers.”⁷⁸ “Don’t alienate one another with your customs! Protect the unity of the church!”⁷⁹

Look at **verse 31**.⁸⁰

³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced⁸¹

I bet they rejoiced. You’d rejoiced too if you were a grown man who was worried about getting circumcised.⁸² The Gentiles in Antioch were sweating bullets until this letter arrived. No knives. No cutting. No pain and discomfort. Hallelujah. Thank you, Jesus.⁸³

But they rejoiced not just because they weren’t getting circumcised. Look at **verse 31** again.

³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.⁸⁴

Listen, when leaders lead... when leaders mediate and make tough decision... when leaders pray and deliberate and seek God for wisdom through a conflict and then finally adjudicate a matter... That’s something to rejoice in. That’s something to celebrate.

Can I just say something about this? We need leaders who have the guts to do things like this, even if it involves some conflict. Even if it involves some argumentation and some hurt feelings. Certainly there will be some who scoff when church leaders make tough decisions. Maybe there were some Judaizers here who never accepted this verdict from their leaders.

⁷⁷ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 35–6: “While the council held the line on gospel fidelity and theological conviction, it also revealed the power of the gospel in dismantling ethnic barriers. The church today would do well to study the Jerusalem Council and remember the power of the gospel in unifying a multinational and multiethnic church. Many churches today divide over ethnic and cultural issues. Different ethnicities in the same communities can harbor suspicion, and in some cases, bitterness towards other ethnicities. Acts 15, however, should remind and convince churches today of God’s intention in the message of the gospel. If the gospel can unite Jews with Gentiles, then it can bridge any divide between any race and ethnicity. May God have mercy on any who would erect a barrier between ethnic groups when God has purposed his gospel to establish a kingdom made up of all tribes, tongues, and nations.”

⁷⁸ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 421: “Paul seems to have adopted a more liberal approach to the issue of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, which was written six or seven years after the council (c. a.d. 55), and perhaps in Romans 14, which was written eight years after the council (c. a.d. 56). We noted that these prohibitions were made more out of sensitivity for the scruples of the Jews than for theological reasons. Thus we can conclude that in applying this passage, we do not need to slavishly follow the prohibitions regarding food. But we do learn about the need to be sensitive to the consciences and scruples of our fellow believers... This is the stance that Paul takes in his discussions in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. He recommends sensitivity to people’s consciences, to the weaker brother, and to putting a stumbling block in the way of someone else. Our convictions must always be tempered by love. Love will make us do things that we have fought against legislating.”

⁷⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 335: “Paul stated that ‘nothing’ was added to his message (Gal 2:6). This does not necessarily conflict with the existence of the decrees. The conference did approve Paul’s basic message of a law-free gospel for the Gentiles—no circumcision, no Torah, no ‘burden.’ The decrees were a strategy for Jewish-Gentile fellowship, and that was something different.”

⁸⁰ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 39: “Christian fellowship devoid of sound theology is no true fellowship. Likewise, theology which does not stir up the body of Christ toward fellowship and worship is no true theology. Verses 30–35 contain the response of the churches to the Jerusalem letter. These verses reveal what happens when the people of God encounter right theology.”

⁸¹ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 40: “As the Holy Spirit protected the church and its doctrine, glorious praise and rejoicing erupted from the teaching of sound theology. Doctrine and theology, when aimed at ushering believers’ hearts into greater worship of God, will not harden a congregation; rather, it will strengthen and encourage the faith of the body. Sound teaching of right theology fosters Christ-exalting fellowship.”

⁸² Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 418: “James concludes that the church ‘should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God’ (v. 19)—perhaps referring to not requiring them to go through the painful (esp. for adults) step of circumcision.”

⁸³ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 75: “They no longer needed to fear that their salvation was not genuine. Legalism produces fear, guilt, and pride, while grace alone brings comfort and hope (2 Thess. 2:16).”

⁸⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 39–40: “Insert yourself into the world of these first-century Christians. We cannot understand the significance of this letter if we fail to empathize with our brothers and sisters of antiquity. There, in a crowded room in Antioch, new Christians assembled together with a host of emotions flooding their thoughts and minds. The proclamation from the apostles would change their lives and exert a profound effect upon the community. As Judas and Silas began to read the letter, no doubt the air stood still and an expectant hush blanketed the room.”

In fact we know that the Judaizing continued. Paul fought against this his entire ministry, as well as other doctrinal errors. Paul also had to fight against people who thought they had a license to sin because of their faith in Christ. “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid” (Rom 6:1–2, KJV).

When leaders lead and make tough decisions, it’s not always what people want to hear. But here, in Acts 15:31, the church in Antioch was encouraged. See that? There was clarity. There was doctrinal conviction. And there was also a compromise presented to protect the unity of the church. That’s good leadership. Bad leaders do nothing. Good leaders act and make tough decisions. And that’s good for the church. This church rejoiced when their leaders came to a decision.

Look at verse 32.

³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ⁸⁵ ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, ⁸⁶ with many others⁸⁷ also.

So, last thoughts. Watch out for “old-school.” Watch out for legalism. Watch out for custom and ritual and traditionalism and “we’ve never done it that way before.” Watch out for people who try to add things to the gospel, and watch out for people who use their freedom in Christ as a license for sin or a license to stumble their brothers and hinder church unity.

- 1) Jesus plus legalism **perverts** the gospel (15:1–5)
- 2) Jesus plus legalism **burdens** new converts (15:6–12)
- 3) Jesus plus legalism or license **hinders** church unity (15:13–35)

I’ll close with this. Here’s a great story told by Winston Churchill. A British family went out for a picnic by a lake. In the course of the afternoon their five year old son fell in the water. And none of the adults could swim. So as the child was bobbing up and down about to drown, and everyone on the shore was in an absolute panic.

But just then, a person came by and saw the situation. And at significant risk to himself he dove in fully clothed and managed to rescue the child. And he presented him safe and sound to his mother. But instead of thanking the stranger for his heroic efforts, the mother snapped peevishly at the rescuer, “where’s Johnny’s cap?” Now she was probably in shock. But in all the commotion of this kid nearly drowning, the boy’s cap had gotten lost. And “instead of rejoicing in her son’s deliverance, the woman found something about which to be critical.”⁸⁸

R. Kent Hughes says this about that story: “It is so easy for us to be like that woman – especially as we relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Somehow others are never quite right. There is always something more that is needed before they measure up. Such an attitude is not only bad for us – it is deadly for the church.”⁸⁹

“O wow, Mrs. so-and-so got saved! But how can that be when she dresses like that?” “O wow, that guy got saved! But he needs to get his act together!” “How can those guys be saved when their children

⁸⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 515: “This verse is not well attested, and so it is omitted from the translation. It says that “it seemed good to Silas to remain there.” The variations in how this is stated also argue against its originality in Acts (D adds, “that they remain, and Judas journeyed alone”). Lacking the verse are \mathfrak{P}^{74} , \aleph , A, B, E, Ψ , and Byz (Metzger 1971: 439). The reason for the addition is likely verse 40, where Paul chooses Silas to accompany him on the next journey. The verse makes an effort to have Silas in Antioch. It ignores the fact, however, that some time has passed and Silas could well have returned after reporting to Jerusalem (Witherington 1998: 470 against Barrett 1998: 750, who sees the plurals in v. 33 as a mistake since they suggest that both Silas and Judas departed). In fact, the addition creates a problem with verse 33 that is lacking without it.”

⁸⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 514: “As often is the case, the topic is the ‘word of the Lord’ (8:25; 13:44, 48–49; 15:35–36; 16:32; 19:10; 20:35).”

⁸⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 337: “The ‘many others’ are significant. This verse is the final glimpse into the life of the Antioch church. Paul and Barnabas would soon be leaving for mission fields elsewhere. The church was left in good hands. There were ‘many others’ who were competent to carry on its witness.”

⁸⁸ Quoted in Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 23.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

behave like that?” “How can that be when they vote for that party?” “How can that be when they spend their money on that... when they listen to that music... when they go to *that* church?”

Listen, listen. Legalism is so sneaky. It's so subtle. And it can very easily take hold of our souls and leave vestiges of exclusivism and discrimination. And then we can miss opportunities to celebrate the greatest truth in the history of the world. God gives free, undeserved grace to a dying world. We don't earn his grace. We're all sinners saved by grace. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.... it is the gift of God... not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8–9). **That's the good news. That's what we've got to protect. Don't let “by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Christ alone” mutate into “Jesus plus legalism.”**