

Urban Evangelism and Clarity in Jerusalem

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

I'm Bea Radenauer. Today's scripture reading is from the book of Acts chapter 15 verses 1 to 15 and 22 to 29 as printed in the liturgy. Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The church sent them on their way and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.

[1 : 11] When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith.

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of a Gentile a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, John spoke up.

[2 : 20] Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The word of the prophets are in agreement with this as it is written.

Then the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They chose Judas, called Barsabas, and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. With them, they sent the following letter. The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.

Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul.

Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.

[3 : 29] You are to abstain from food sacrifice to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks so much, Bea. And good morning, you all.

It's good to be with you. Kids, don't feel bad if you don't know what circumcision is. I had to explain it to Andrew earlier this week. I was trying to explain the differences between being Scottish and Chinese.

It was a long conversation. But anyway, it's good to be here together. Super glad it's summertime. And we went camping, not this past week, but the week before. And I read the first book I've read for fun in like two years, which I highly recommend to you, called A Gentleman in Moscow.

Great historical fiction. Wonderful. Thanks to Ken Johnston for letting me borrow his book. But our family's leaving to go on vacation later this week. And if you have other great must-read summer books, we would love to hear about those at our coffee time.

[4 : 38] But our summer read as a church for Christ Church this summer is the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the early church. The Acts of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

And we're looking at this book because we're asking the question, what kind of church does God want us to be? What kind of church are we going to be in this post-COVID moment?

What kind of church is God wanting to rebuild among us? And so we're going to talk today about this church meeting, which you're like, oh, it's boring. You know, who cares about a church meeting?

But actually this book opens up in chapter 1 and you have the ascension of Jesus into heaven. You have Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit.

And sandwiched between these two world-altering events is a church meeting. A meeting to answer a very messy question, who's going to replace Judas? Who's going to be part of our leadership team as a church?

[5 : 37] And then here in Acts 15, we have another important church meeting, which is really the turning point of the book. It's the centerpiece and the watershed of the whole thing to answer another really big question.

And to seek God through his word and through his spirit. And in the middle of this conversation, in the middle of this discussion, the apostle Peter stands up and he says in verse 11, No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

And that's an amazing statement in and of itself on many levels. Because a short time before this, the apostle Paul had a first-class argument with the apostle Peter.

And Paul publicly contradicted and rebuked his brother Peter. Why did he do that? We read about that in verse 1. And certain individuals came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

Antioch was just north of Israel and Syria. It was this emerging center of Christianity. A city of about 500,000 people. And in that city, there were about 18 different eclectic ethnic groups.

[6 : 59] And among these ethnic Gentiles, they started to hear the gospel of Jesus. And many of them started to follow Jesus alongside of these Jewish believers.

And Gentile converts were just pouring into the church. And so this group of Christians became a pressure group called the Pharisee party. And they came along and started to teach that circumcision and obedience to the Torah were a necessary condition and a prerequisite for salvation into the kingdom of God.

That you had to have both faith in the Messiah and the works of the law to be saved into his kingdom. And tragically, the apostle Peter caved in to this point of view.

And previously, he had enjoyed fellowship with Gentile, uncircumcised Christians. But then, you can read all about this in Galatians chapter 2.

He began to withdraw himself. He began to separate himself. He began to practice and impose upon himself a theological and spiritual apartheid to not have fellowship anymore with these Gentile Christians.

[8 : 16] And Paul, seeing that the heart of the gospel was at stake, he opposed Peter to his face. And then, they sent a delegation to Jerusalem to consult with the rest of the apostles and the elders to settle this dispute.

And this is probably when Paul dashed off his letter to the Galatians. And if you read that letter, you can feel the heat of this moment, the heat of this dispute and debate.

And I want to say that there's really never been a golden moment in Christianity without that heat. Without these questions, without these church meetings, without these debates to determine the truth.

Who's going to be our next church leader? How can ethnic Gentiles be saved and not become culturally Jews? And that question is so important, this question of eternal salvation.

What must I do to be saved? How can I, a lost and guilty sinner, stand before a just and holy God? Where am I going to spend eternity? How can I spend eternity with my creator?

[9 : 30] The answers to those questions bear on every aspect of our relationships with each other, bear on every aspect of our lives. So, I hope to unpack some of that for you today. And the point I want to make here is that the church centers on the gracious Savior, the cleansing Spirit, and the inspired Scriptures.

Let me start with how the church centers on the gracious Savior. Savior. Again, verse 11, Peter says, no. We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

And when Peter says no, he's rejecting a false teaching by fellow Christians, the Pharisee party, the Judaizers, which he temporarily embraced.

And thank God for Paul's courage in confronting and admonishing his brother Peter to come back in line with the truth in love. And thank God for Peter's humility to acknowledge his fault and repent of his mistake.

And thank God that by the time they came to this Jerusalem council, Peter was back in full accord with Paul. He was living in line with the truth of the gospel and the unity of God's truth had been preserved.

[10 : 51] So that when Peter says, we believe, he's saying, this is what we believe about the apostolic scheme of salvation.

And by implication, what is the false scheme of salvation that he's rejecting? Peter says, salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus alone.

And what is grace? Grace is that free, totally undeserved gift of God that takes initiative and comes after us and rescues us from ourselves.

It's when the creator God graciously sends his son Jesus who graciously empties himself of his heavenly glory to become not just a human being, but a humble servant who humbles himself all the way down to death on a shameful cross.

And on that cross, he bore our sin, he died our death, he paid our debts. And that crucified Jesus would be resurrected from the dead in order that he might now come after each one of us with the gospel of grace.

[12 : 00] To reconcile us to reconcile us to God as our father. To give us the gifts of faith and the Holy Spirit. To give us that spirit that cleanses and purifies us from sin.

That spirit that regenerates and recreates us from the inside out and gives us a new life in Jesus. A new life that will be completed at the last day when our humanity is fully transformed.

Fully in conformity with who Jesus is. And we're going to get a new resurrected body like his. We're going to live in a new creation where heaven has come down to earth.

All of that and more is what we mean when we say that we're saved by grace. Because grace is that undeserved initiative that Jesus takes to reconcile us to God and make us whole and full and true human beings.

And we contribute nothing to our salvation. That's the conclusion of this church meeting. That we're not saved even a little bit by ourselves.

[13 : 14] There was a former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. And he famously said, The only thing of our very own which we contribute to our salvation is the sin which makes it necessary.

This Pharisee party was the first of many, many, many well-meaning Christians through the past 2,000 years. Who decided they didn't like this non-contributing scheme of salvation.

That they strenuously insisted like many people have. No, we contribute something of our own obedience as a prerequisite to God accepting us and saving us.

Jesus' good work, that's good but it's not sufficient. If you want God to love you, if you want God to save you, then you must add to Jesus' work the good works of your own.

And we call that Jesus plus theology. A Jesus plus theology insists on a contributing scheme of salvation in which salvation is a joint enterprise between God and us.

[14 : 22] But Peter says, No. No. Salvation is not something we achieve. Salvation is something we simply receive.

And friends, human pride resists divine grace. Because how many of us really want to be paupers who depend entirely on the charity of heaven?

How many of us want to say that we're beggars who feed totally from the hands of Jesus? Our prideful hearts don't like that.

But that's what grace means. This party of well-meaning Christians got it wrong. And they needed to go home that day realizing that they were out of line with the truth of the gospel.

That we're saved by the sheer unmerited favor of Jesus with no contribution from us. We sing this great hymn in the church.

[15 : 22] Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling. Naked. Come to thee for dress. Helpless. Look to thee for grace. Foul.

I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior. Or I die. There is no religion in the world that rides so roughly over human pride as Christianity.

And that's my question for myself today and for you as well. Have you allowed this gospel of grace to rip up your self-righteousness to tatters?

Have you allowed God's grace to shatter your conceit to smithereens? Because that's the fruit of saying that we're saved alone by this grace of Jesus.

That we become a humble people. A people with humble hearts before God. And the church centers on this gracious Savior. But the church also centers on God's cleansing spirit.

[16 : 22] The church centers on God's cleansing spirit. And this is Peter's point when he stands up in this meeting and he says in verse 8, God who knows the heart showed that he accepted the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us Jews.

He did not discriminate between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith. And when he says they purified he uses the word katerizo. He katerized their hearts.

And that's a medical practice where you burn a part of the body to remove and close off a wounded and infected part of the rest of the body. And when you cauterize something you destroy some tissue in order to mitigate bleeding and damage.

And that's what the Holy Spirit has done in our hearts at the innermost roots of our beings. He's freed us from the wound and the infection of the self-centeredness that was previously destroying not only us but destroying the world.

And so to be a Christian is to live with the presence and the power and the purification of this cauterizing spirit of God inside of me, in my mind, in my heart, in my will.

[17 : 43] So that though I contribute nothing to my salvation, I'm called as a disciple of Jesus to work out my salvation with a strenuous effort that the power of God's spirit living in me enables me to live out a cauterized and purified love for God, for his people, for the world.

This is how Peter puts it in his first letter. He says in 1 Peter 1, verse 2, You have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying or purifying work of the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

And having established who the Holy Spirit is and what the Holy Spirit does as our purifier and our sanctifier, Peter says that the basis of Christian fellowship is a common sharing in this Holy Spirit who applies the grace and the salvation of Jesus to us.

He says in verses 8 to 9, he says we all have the same spirit. We have the same spirit-given faith, the same spirit-given purity, the same spirit-given acceptance to God our Father.

And he says in verse 11, he says we Jews and they Gentiles are one because we're saved by the same person, Jesus.

[19 : 07] We're saved in the same way, grace. And that's made operative and effective in our lives by the Holy Spirit. Peter's argument here is that internal purity of heart makes Christian fellowship possible, not external purity of ritual.

Internal purity of faith, not external purity of works. The unity of fellowship that we enjoy with one another is based on our common salvation from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And if God made no distinction between us and them, says Peter, then we should make no distinction between us and them.

And friends, in the 21st century, there's just far too many us and them divisions in Jesus' church. Amen?

There are many historical, social, economic, political, intellectual forces that are trying to squeeze us into a mold that tells us we need to be divided.

[20 : 15] Powerful ideologies, powerful ideologies, powerful algorithms that want to drive a wedge between us and keep us locked in this eternal struggle between us and them.

Because I'm of Scottish descent. Because I'm of Scottish descent. And you're of Chinese descent. And you're of Kenyan descent. And you're of Mexican descent. That we can't be one family together.

Because we've got a Democrat over here and a Republican over here. We can't be a family together. But the church of Jesus, that's full of the purifying spirit of God, is called to be different.

Am I getting, can I get anything out there? We are saved in the same way because the ground at the foot of the cross is level. We've been accepted by God in the same way, so we should accept one another in the same way, says Peter.

We should welcome one another as God has welcomed us. And this is how Paul says it in his very passionate letter in Galatians chapter 3 verse 28.

[21 : 20] There is neither Jew nor Gentile. Neither slave nor free. Nor is there male or female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Our differences aren't demolished.

We still have our ethnicities. We still have our biological sexes. We still have our temperaments and ages and languages and accents and cultural backgrounds and educations and personal stories.

That make us utterly unique individuals within an astonishing array of diversity just in this room. But overarching all of those distinctions is our common salvation.

That's been put into effect and made operative by the presence and power and purification of the Holy Spirit of God. And we can apply this even today as we come to this table in just a minute, the Lord's Supper today.

We're going to eat bread from the common loaf of Jesus' body. We're going to drink wine from the common cup of Jesus' blood. And when we do that, I want us not to focus on our differences of race and class and sexuality and gender and all of these other things.

[22 : 32] I want us to come together and focus on the fact that the people around us are wanted and welcomed by God just as much as we are. I want us to focus on the fact that we belong to the same redeemed community of Jesus throughout the world.

And that we are all equal citizens of the kingdom of God, all brothers and sisters in the family that the Father loves so much that he sent his Son and he sent his Spirit to purify us.

And to make us different in this world. You feeling me? So the church centers on a gracious Savior, the gracious Savior.

It centers on the cleansing spirit. But the church also centers on the inspired scriptures. And this is where we'll end. It's July 4th. Hopefully you're listening to the musical Hamilton.

This is now the primary lens through which we learn history and interpret the history of the founding of our country. And the writer of this musical, Lin-Manuel Miranda, one of his favorite songs he wrote in that musical was The Room Where It Happens.

[23 : 40] You guys know this song, The Room Where It Happens? It's about the compromise of 1790 between Hamilton on the one hand and Madison and Jefferson on the other. And basically the compromise was, you know, the national government will pay all the state's debts.

But the national capital will move to the District of Columbia to be closer to the south. Right? And amazing lines in the song. Miranda says, And my question for us is, is this Jerusalem Council of 48 A.D. the same as the compromise of 1790?

Did this meeting happen in a private room behind closed doors? And do we not really know how the game was played? Read verses 12 and following with me.

The whole assembly became silent after Peter spoke and they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. And when they finished, James, the pastor of First Presbyterian Jerusalem, he stood up and he spoke up and he said, Brothers, listen to me.

Simon Peter has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this as it is written.

[25 : 18] I want to say that Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James show us how the game is played here. They show us that a healthy church talks about the experience of God converting people to himself, the Gentiles, through Paul and Barnabas on the one hand.

And a healthy church talks about the word of God that guides us into the truth. On the other hand, Pastor James standing up to speak about the prophets, Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, which we didn't read to you.

The reason this is important to me is because postmodern people read Scripture through the lens of their experience.

But the apostles tell us to read our experience through the lens of Scripture. They hold up this issue of Gentile inclusion in the church up to the light of what has been written, what God has revealed in his authoritative word.

For the apostles, doctrinal and moral truth was not to be found in their individual, personal, subjective experiences. It wasn't to be found in their feelings about those experiences.

[26 : 29] Doctrinal truth, moral truth, was to be found in the voice of God written into the text of Scripture. So that later on in verse 28, when they write this letter and they say, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, they're thinking about Jesus teaching.

That the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. And the Spirit will lead you into all the truth that I've spoken to you, all the truth about who I am and what I've done. And that's what James is thinking here.

He's saying, look, we've had the Hebrew Bible all along. All that that Bible says about the Gentile nations. But we misinterpreted the Bible. We misunderstood it to mean that Gentiles needed to become Jews.

But now we have the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit enables us to reread our Bibles. To interpret Scripture by Scripture. And to become reformed according to the word of God.

Now what does that mean for us 21st century Christians? Well some people point to the Gentiles not needing to follow the ceremonial laws of the Bible.

[27 : 38] Of circumcision and all these things that the book of Leviticus talks about. And they say, look, if they don't have to practice these laws of circumcision and a kosher diet. And the feast of Passover.

And worshiping in the temple. And all these sacrifices and all this stuff. Then doesn't that prove that we can set aside any part of the Bible that doesn't fit us anymore? Aren't we free to pick and choose what to hold on to.

And mix and match what we let go of. But friends, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, I've not come to abolish the law. I've come to fulfill it.

And just because Jesus fulfilled all of these ceremonial laws that were signposts to his person and his work. Does not mean that any party of Christians has the authority and the right to dispense of God's moral laws altogether.

In fact, unless the authoritative Bible itself tells you that part of the Bible is no longer binding on you. Then you are not allowed to put anything in the Bible aside unless the Bible itself tells you to put it aside.

[28 : 47] You tracking with me? So look at verse 28. They say, It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.

Having established the truth that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. That it's God's work and not our work. Now the apostles want to show that God's grace is at work in our lives.

When we work that grace out in grateful obedience to the requirements of God's moral law. They don't expect or assume that Gentile Christians will follow the ceremonial and civil laws of the Torah.

But they do assume that Gentile Christians will absolutely follow the moral law of the Ten Commandments in the Torah. Because this is our biblical blueprint for Christ-like living.

These are the divinely inscripturated words that safeguard us from offending God and oppressing our neighbors. And how are the Ten Commandments life-giving guardrails for us?

[29 : 56] They negatively speaking keep us from idolatry and immorality. And positively speaking they show us how to love God with all our heart.

And how to love our neighbors as ourselves. God has written this law on the human heart. And God has sent his son Jesus to perfectly fulfill this law.

And that's why he wants his people, Jewish and Gentile Christians, to live by it. And beyond that moral law of the Ten Commandments, these Gentile Christians are asked to avoid four specific things listed in verse 29 to give no needless offense.

And where do these four items come from? They come from the Bible. They come from Moses. They come exactly from Leviticus chapter 17 and 18 that says both Jews and Gentiles are to avoid these particular things.

Why? Because every city in the world at the time had Jewish inhabitants. Because every church was becoming this strange, new, unheard of, multi-ethnic mixture of Jews and Gentiles.

[31 : 07] Because Christians were claiming that in Jesus the Messiah, the law and the prophets had been fulfilled. And because this claim was always going to be at best puzzling and at worst offensive.

Gentile Christians. Gentile Christians are encouraged not to offer needless offense to their fellow Jewish believers or their as yet unbelieving Jewish neighbors.

It would therefore be a great help, says the apostles, if you would keep away from pagan temples and all the pagan culture and things that are going on inside of those temples.

By asking Gentile Christians to steer clear of pagan idolatry and pagan immorality, the apostles are protecting and preserving the integrity of the church's loving fellowship and the influence of the church's provocative mission.

Yes, converts into the church are welcomed, but not without limits. Not without requirements. Even as change was required of Jewish Christians to include these converted Gentiles into their fellowships, so these converted Gentiles must change their lifestyle, must change their behaviors to come in line with the gospel out of love for the church community and for the sake of our ministry and for the sake of our ministry and for the sake of our witness as the light of the world.

[32 : 38] Nothing in our behavior should obscure the light of Jesus' grace shining through us to all people. Everything in our actions should reflect the light of God's goodness, beauty, and truth going out to all people.

And how did the church come to this conclusion? How did they come to this conclusion? They came to it on the basis of the authoritative, inspired scriptures of God, which is one of the greatest treasures we have.

So Christchurch, my prayer and my hope is that as we move further into 2021, further into this post-pandemic reality, as we're having questions and conversations about who are we as a church, what have we been about, who are we going to become, and I pray, Lord, make us centered on the gracious Savior.

Make us centered on the experience of this cleansing spirit. Make us centered, Lord God, on your inspired scriptures. That's what I want.

Is that what you want? Is that what you want? In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen. Amen. So. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 57] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. You need to hear the spirit of God. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.