

Christianity is for all people

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Church. My name is James. It is good to be with you this morning. My family and I have been doing a number of walks lately, because it's about the only thing you can do to get out, and it's the only thing we've been doing to stay sane.

And one of the things that's happened for Alyssa and I is that we'll often have a location in mind. We're going to go to this particular park. We're going to go to this playground. We're going to walk down to the National Park.

And what will happen is that as we were walking there, I'll say to Alyssa, why are you going to turn down that street? Go this way. This is the fastest way there.

I don't know what you're doing. And this has happened a number of times over a number of years, so much so that I've coined a phrase for it, which is, you're doing something different, therefore you are wrong.

What are you going to go down that path? That's the wrong way. You're doing something different to me. Therefore, you are wrong. It's a way of explaining a certain frustration that we can feel when people are doing things different to us.

[1 : 06] I wonder if you've felt this kind of feeling in the past. We see people doing things that are different to us, and we can quickly jump to judgment and assumptions.

You use different utensils to eat food. That's different, therefore it's wrong. You eat smelly cheese. Oh, that's gross. You eat durian. I can't even understand that.

You value radical individualism. That's just wrong. You value the collectivist family unit. That's different to me, so you must be wrong.

What is the impact of God's command to love our neighbor when it comes to this? Do we only love those who are like us?

Do we actually find it really hard to love those who are different, because we can quickly jump to thinking that they're wrong? I'm not sure how you felt yesterday as you saw the protests through Sydney.

[2 : 04] I felt particularly frustrated that there would be thousands of people gathering and wanting to get out of lockdown, and yet seeming, in my mind, to be doing something that's just going to make COVID worse.

I was frustrated, and I was angry, and I was quickly jumping to assumptions about these people. I don't know their individual circumstances. I don't know how desperate these people are feeling in this very difficult season.

And so for all of us, it is easy to think you are doing something different, and you are wrong, and to judge people quickly. We are in the second half of the book of Acts.

Jesus has been raised from the dead. He has ascended to heaven. He has sent His disciples out to spread the good news, that Jesus is for all people. And now, we are seeing that the gospel is spreading out from the ethnic base in Jerusalem.

But as it's spreading to different ethnic areas, it's going to cause problems. It's going to spread to people who live differently, who eat differently, who think differently, and who are going to worship the same God slightly differently.

[3 : 18] What's going to happen? Will the church flourish and grow in a multi-ethnic way? Or will there be conflict because people are doing things differently?

And will they just think you are wrong and have conflict? As we follow the gospel spread out of Jerusalem across the world, our challenge today will be for us to grow in awareness of our own cultural, ethnic blind spots.

For us to be aware of how quickly we judge. And for us to grow in love for our neighbors. So why don't I pray as we have a look at Acts chapter 15.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would be with us this morning. Give us an awareness of our own blindness to other people's differences.

Give us an awareness of how quickly we judge. And Father, help us to be like you. Help us to love people. Love people even when they are different to us, Lord.

[4 : 23] We ask this in your Son's name. Amen. Amen. Three points today. You'll be able to find those on the St. Paul's app. First of all, we are going to see a conflict that arises before we see the resolution and finally reconciliation.

So let's have a look at the conflict. We've seen some of the church in Antioch in the last couple of weeks. And it has been an exciting place. Steve mentioned last week that the Antioch is the place where a lot of the Gentile missionaries spread.

And, you know, we as a church in Chatswood can trace our roots back to Antioch. It has been a flourishing church. And some Jewish Christians who are misinformed come down to Antioch and bring some problems.

Please have a look with me at Acts chapter 15, verse 1. Now, there is two layers to this problem. First, there is a theological difference. And then there is an ethnic or a cultural difference. And we need to carefully look between these two.

[5 : 44] And it's just lazy to dismiss someone because they are saying something different. They're saying something that we don't necessarily agree with.

It would be very easy to think they're adding to salvation here. Let's just ignore these people. These Jewish believers have come down from Judea and they're obviously very concerned for the Gentiles.

They want them to be saved. They've come down. They've gone on a journey from Jerusalem to Antioch. They've gotten out their soapboxes and they're standing up in front of everyone and saying, if you want to be saved, this is what you must do.

They're not doing it because they don't care for these people. They're actually doing it out of love, even if there is a problem with what they're saying, even if there is big theological issues.

It would be easy to just dismiss them. It would be easy to ignore them, to think these Jewish Christians are wrong. It's salvation by grace alone.

[6 : 46] I'm going to have nothing to do with them. But we need to just step into their shoes for a moment, into these Jewish Christian shoes, because it's not just a matter of them wanting people to just follow very religious rules.

Because for these Jewish Christians, it's a matter of identity and ethnicity. To be saved meant to be part of God's family, to be part of Israel.

And the way that happened in the Old Testament, the covenant set up by Moses, which we've seen in our series through Exodus, it only happened through obedience to the Lord.

It only happened through circumcision. Circumcision. Other people have joined Israel in the past, and this is what it looked like. Circumcision was the external mark of the inward reality.

It was the mark that you were a part of God's family. But now, entry into God's family is different. Jesus has come.

[7 : 47] He is the true Israel. The one who could obey the Mosaic laws fully. The one who came so that we would not just have a circumcision of the flesh, but a circumcision of the heart, so that we could love God.

And so, we see these Jewish believers, they come with sincere love for these Gentiles, these Gentiles in Antioch. But Paul and Barnabas have good cause to have a conflict with them, to have a dispute with them.

Because understanding their ethnic background is important, but we also need to understand the theology, the issue at hand. Because what we believe about God matters.

Have a look with me at verse 2. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. Conflict here.

I'm not sure how you feel about conflict. Maybe you don't like having conflict. Maybe you think conflict is equal to war, and it should be avoided at all costs. But here, conflict is actually quite important.

[8 : 57] Because what these Jewish Christians were saying was going to be deadly to the Christian faith. It was dangerous to this young church, and it ran the risk of taking all of the power out of the Christian faith.

Because what they were preaching was that it is Jesus plus something, and that's how you get salvation. It's Jesus plus obedience to the law, circumcision. That's how you get salvation. Whenever we add to the gospel, we actually destroy it. Jesus plus anything does not equal salvation. That's just being burdened with something else to follow.

And this is one of the wonderful things that sets Christianity apart from any other religion. Religions say, this is what you must do to be saved. Christianity says, Jesus has done it.

God's grace to us is Jesus came, he lived, and he died, and he was raised so that we could be raised too. We must be careful to not be like these Jewish Christians and add anything to the gospel.

[10 : 04] Whether it's adding the sacraments, whether it's adding obedience to our family, whatever it is that we add, it takes away from Jesus dying on the cross.

As if I could add to God dying on the cross. Now imagine you were this young church in Antioch. You have been seeing people come to faith.

You've got Paul and Barnabas preaching there. You are hearing the good news. You are being encouraged. You've changed your life. And you've gotten rid of sexual immorality.

You've stopped sinning in certain ways. You are growing in your knowledge and faith of the Lord. And then people come down from Jerusalem. These are people from the home church.

These are people who may have seen Jesus. And they come down and you're excited. And then they start telling you, you've got it all wrong. You actually don't know how to get salvation.

[11 : 04] You've got to do these other things to get salvation. Imagine how you'd feel if you were the church in Antioch. Maybe nobody here is actually saved.

Maybe I'm actually not good enough for this God because I can't do everything required. If I was in Antioch, I'd feel shamed. Or maybe I'd just feel tempted to ignore these Jewish Christians who'd come down because what they were saying was different to me.

And so I'm just going to completely ignore them. This is the conflict. This is the issue. And we're going to see how it gets resolved. And so what the church in Antioch do is they send Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem to see this situation get resolved.

They get to Jerusalem. They report to the elders and to the leaders there everything that is happening. They report the church is growing. Lives are being changed.

There is real faith. There is growth in the church in Antioch. And the party that had started these issues gets up and speaks. Have a look with me at verse 5.

[12 : 14] 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 Gentiles must be circumcised. This is the Pharisees who stood up. And I'm not sure how you feel, but as soon as I see the Pharisees come on, I'm just tempted to boo.

It's like the villains have come onto the stage and I want to throw tomatoes at them. You know, the Pharisees, they're the ones who led Jesus to be crucified. These are the bad guys in so much of the New Testament.

Paul himself was a Pharisee. He was out there trying to kill Christians until he got saved. I can't help but see Pharisees here and not like it.

And I want to see them get put in their place. And it's really easy to demonize these people. But Luke, the author of Acts, he doesn't do that. Have a look with me again.

[13 : 16] Verse 5. Then some of the believers, some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up. Luke actually describes them as believers.

They're Christians. They are Christians who have converted, but they're also Pharisees. They're not the enemies. They're part of the same family.

They have some theological issues. They need to continue to grow following Jesus, to change their previous thoughts and understand how the gospel impacts their lives and what it means and how Jesus is the one who has obeyed.

But Luke describes them as Christians. And sometimes people in the family of God will disagree. Sometimes there will be fights.

It's fights over what is important. Disagreements sometimes need church councils and leaders of the church to gather together to work on these issues.

[14:17] In church, there might also be some disagreements about music or styles of music or preferred seats or morning tea. But most of these issues in the church come down to personal preference and pride.

Here there is conflict that comes from the Pharisees' background. They have historically seen the Gentiles as unclean. They need to be cleansed by obedience to the law.

They need to be circumcised so they can be part of God's family. And these Pharisees have legitimate theological concerns. And so Peter stands up in verse 7.

And the first thing that we see get clarified here is not the ethnic and cultural difference. The first thing that gets clarified is the theological issue. Have a look with me.

Verse 7. 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.

[15:20] 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.

Peter reminds everyone of the vision he had in Acts 10 and his experience of Gentiles being converted. God has showed that he is for all people.

The Pharisees, his concern, their concern is that the Gentiles would be pure, that they would have pure hearts. And Peter says God's done it. God has made their hearts pure, not by obedience to the law, but by Jesus, but by his blood, people can be cleansed.

Verse 10. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles 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 issue of theology is clarified first. It is only by the grace of Jesus that we can be saved. Not by what happens to a certain part of our body, not by what we do, but only by Jesus.

[16:39] This issue of conflict, while we might want to avoid conflict, it's actually really important for the life of the church here. It's really helpful. Because there was a group that wanted to say that you had to believe in Jesus and do these certain things, but that was never going to work.

Because salvation is by God's grace alone. So we have seen this conflict that has ethnic issues and also a theological issue.

We have seen the issue be resolved, but we're going to see reconciliation now. We're going to see the reconciliation that comes from the ethnic layer being dealt with as well.

What is happening now is, as the gospel is spreading out, it's going from being an ethnic faith and it's growing across the world and it's changing.

It's moving from just being ethnically Jewish to being a worldwide religion. But that doesn't mean there won't continue to be differences and issues. It actually means there will be more issues.

[17:50] As there are ethnically Jewish Christians and different types of ethnically Gentile Christians. How are these groups of people going to live together? How are they going to grow as a church without splitting and without having continual conflict?

Because keeping circumcision is neither good nor bad. It doesn't save and so it doesn't actually matter. And so for the sake of this growing multi-ethnic church, James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, gets up.

He speaks and he goes back to prophecy from the Old Testament that said that the Gentiles would come in. The Gentiles were promised to come in. And yet, being aware of that means that they need to be aware that faith is going to look different for different people.

James is keen to see these Gentiles brought into the faith, but he doesn't expect them to look like Jewish Christians. And so he sets out a plan for the Gentiles.

It is for them to be culturally aware of their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters. To not need to be circumcised, but to love those who are different.

[19:08] Have a look at the plan James sets out with me in verse 19. It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Instead, we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

James sets out a plan for these different groups of people to work together. The Gentiles were to love the Jews by not eating meat that had been strangled, don't eat food sacrificed to idols, and don't eat blood.

These are all things that the Jews would religiously and also culturally find disgusting. It's not a legal way to earn salvation, but it was a love of those people who were different.

The Jews were moving from a long history of what it meant to follow God, now that they had Jesus, these Jewish Christians, but they would need love.

[20 : 14] And so don't get in their face and eat meat that had been full of blood, because it would be offensive to them. It wouldn't be loving to someone that was different.

James here also mentions sexual immorality. And this might seem strange as we're talking about ethnic differences, but the Jewish people had a history of seeking to be sexually pure, of seeing marriage as the place for sexual relationships.

It's in the Ten Commandments, it's in the history of the Old Testament. But what's this got to do with ethnic concerns? Well, the Gentiles were historically far more sexually immoral than the Jews.

The Christian gospel calls people to sexual purity, just like the Old Testament. But it is of so much cultural importance, so much Christian importance, that James really stresses it for this Gentile church in Antioch.

We saw that there was two layers of problems at the start. There was the theological issue of what must be done to get salvation, and it's only by the grace in Jesus.

[21 : 25] That's the first issue that's been clarified. James and Peter have clarified that, but now the issue of ethnic difference has been dealt with. The council has met, they've confirmed that it's only the gospel of grace in Jesus, but now the gospel is actually breaking down barriers between different cultures.

Previously, Jews would have nothing to do with Gentiles, but now they can have close relationships. They can only do this when they love each other, when they're aware of the cultural differences.

This young church in both Jerusalem and in Antioch is learning what it's actually going to look like for them to walk together in love, to see the unity in Christ and not their cultural differences which divide.

The Gentiles here are called to have cultural intelligence, to understand the impact of their actions on other people. American multi-ethnic church pastor, Mark DeMaz, wrote this book.

It's called Building a Multi-Ethnic Church, and he describes the lessons that these churches use as different stages of cultural awareness.

[22 : 46] The first stage is called cultural destructiveness. It's effectively what the Jewish Christians had come down to the Antioch church were doing. They were saying, you must become like me.

You must leave your culture, and you must culturally become like me. You must take on circumcision. You must take on obedience to the Mosaic law if you want to be saved. That's cultural destructiveness.

The Gentile Christians were effectively in a period of cultural blindness. They weren't aware of their actions, the food they ate, that would cause issues to Jewish Christians.

And that is why James says, be aware of these things. Don't be culturally blind. Be aware of these cultural differences out of love. James is seeking to bring cultural awareness so that there is not cultural destructiveness.

You must become like me. You need to leave who you are at the door to church. No, we can have cultural differences. Don't be culturally blind, but be culturally aware.

[23 : 55] We, as ethnic Jews, we find these things harmful. So don't do these. Be aware of them. Out of love for us. The step after this is called cultural sensitivity.

The Apostle Paul shows this in dealing with Christians of different maturity levels. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul talks about that if it would cause a brother or sister to sin or to stumble, he would rather not eat meat at all.

He is saying, I have freedom to eat meat. I can do whatever I like, but out of love, I will not do that because I don't want to hurt somebody else. I don't want to cause them to sin.

He is aware of his actions on somebody else and he will actually limit his freedom out of love.

Gentile and Jewish Christians were to remember the gospel that unites them before their cultural differences got in the way.

And so James sends a letter and two brothers from Jerusalem, Silas and Judas, with these details. And it's a really wonderful thing as this letter is sent. Remember how this young church in Antioch could have been feeling.

[25 : 12] Nervous. What is the church at home going to say to us? Are we going to get in trouble? Are we going to have to change what we're doing? Are we really saved? And James sends this letter with Judas and Silas and the news comes back.

Have a look with me. Verse 30. So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessings of peace to return to those who had sent them.

This issue of conflict has actually been really wonderful. It's brought gospel fruit. The conflict through dispute taken to the council, it's brought clarity on the good news of Jesus.

But not only that, coming back, it's actually encouraged the believers. Believers are strengthened. There was peace now between these two churches. Now, we might be tempted to think that conflict is only a bad thing.

[26 : 25] Conflict over theological differences are actually a hindrance to good and close relationships. But this shows that conflict can actually be good.

Conflict is important because there is a close connection between our theology and fellowship. We are only connected because of what we believe about our God.

As we continue to learn more about our God, as we read in the Bible throughout the week, we learn more about our God, it brings us to greater worship of Him.

It doesn't need to harden us to each other. But it can be like here in Antioch, where we are strengthened and encouraged to love one another.

For us, as a multi-ethnic church full of people of different backgrounds, different theologies, we all think different things about God, we are all growing to learn more and more about Him.

[27 : 26] we are going to face many of these two issues. Cultural differences, theological differences. The person that thinks differently to me and therefore they're wrong, is that going to be our first thought?

You think differently, you think differently, you've got different practices, you've got different theology to me, therefore you're wrong. Is that how we are going to first think and act? A community, a church here, is united by Jesus.

We are people made up of many different ethnicities. This is expressed in the flags that you can see to my sides. But we can all suffer from similar issues to the church in Jerusalem and Antioch. Some from the church in Jerusalem had a culturally destructive view. You must be like me. We can have that view too. You must do exactly what I do.

You must think exactly like me. You must leave who you are at the door and become like me. We can be culturally destructive to others instead of celebrating our differences and that it is Jesus that unites us.

[28 : 42] They were also adding to Jesus' work for salvation. But thankfully, this council in Jerusalem clarified the gospel. The letters sent back to Antioch make sure that the Gentile church don't have cultural blindness.

But we can walk with cultural blindness too. We can be driven by these same issues. We can be driven by pride in our own cultural way of doing things, in our own theology.

All cultures want to emphasize different things. Western culture emphasizes radical individualism. Asian culture, Asian communities emphasize communal collectivist culture.

And there are impacts both inside and outside the church. Inside the church, we would talk about the importance of a person being saved.

So from a Western view, we would talk about the importance of you following Jesus. The importance of you repenting. The importance of you as an individual turning your life around and following God.

[29 : 51] That is what the Western culture is going to identify and emphasize. An Asian community might emphasize that it is we as a church who follows Jesus, that we need to repent.

And the individual can think, oh well, I'm going in the same direction. Now there is positives and negatives to both of these. I am not saved because of the faith of my parents.

Both of my parents are wonderful Christians. But their faith hasn't saved me. It's just like my faith and Alyssa's faith is not going to save my children. But what we do as a family and what we do as a church is that we teach our children.

And so I'm not saved because of my family but they certainly took me to church. I certainly bring my kids to church. I'd love if they were here at church today. But we've been sitting with them and reading the Bible with them.

It's not just I will leave you to choose as an individual whether you will follow God. No, I value this so much that I will teach you and disciple you.

[31 : 06] I want to have other people in your life as well. And so we can easily go down one side and emphasize Western values or Eastern values to the detriment of having both.

We do need to take individual personal responsibility for the faith that we have but we are also a family of believers a community encouraging each other calling each other to continue to follow the Lord.

We can't expect to put all Christians in the world into the same box and say you must worship exactly like me. You must think about faith exactly like me.

Because the Bible doesn't do that. There is space for difference. I liken it to eating. All cultures across the world eat food differently.

And there isn't necessarily one right way to do it. Imagine you had a table even eating at a table is a cultural assumption. Imagine you've got a group of people eating together.

[32 : 11] You've got a person from England they've got a lovely set of cutlery silver knife and fork wonderful. You've got a Chinese person with chopsticks. You've got a Kenyan sitting at the table and they're eating with their right hand and they're scooping up ugali with a curry and you've got an Indian also using their right hand to use naan to get curry.

You can say that they all have to do the exact same thing but it is not being aware that there is good cultural difference among us. Celebrating what is different remembering that it is Jesus who unites us.

This is a really important word for us for when we return as a church. But I've hardly been seeing anybody. I'm sure it's the same with you.

I would almost love to have had cultural conflict or theological conflict with someone because that would mean I would be in relationship with people. Church, I miss you.

I miss all of you. But the challenge for us in this season of lockdown is that as we stay at home we tend to do what is easiest, the things that we prefer and what is most comfortable.

[33 : 27] This is not what a multi-ethnic church does. A multi-ethnic church doesn't do what is easiest for us. In this season we are not getting a chance to love each other, to love across cultural differences.

You know, we saw Paul choose to put aside differences out of love for somebody so he said he would never eat meat again if that was what was required. The Gentile Christians were to practice love for their Jewish brothers and sisters, the Jewish Christians, by not eating meat that was strangled to idols and those things by being culturally aware.

When we come back from lockdown it's going to be easy to think that church, you know, it's not as convenient as it used to be. You know, I've gotten used to sleeping in and watching the service at 2.30 in the afternoon.

I'm going to keep doing that instead of going back when church opens up. I've gotten used to walking out halfway through and getting a coffee. You know, I'm at home and so I've gotten used to watching the Olympics during church.

I've gotten used to being distracted. We will all have gotten used to doing our own personal preferences. We need to be prepared for when we come back as a church, whenever that is, hopefully very soon, to do the hard thing of loving across differences, across our comfort zone.

[34 : 50] It will be hard when we return to church. We will go back with the four square metre rule, we'll go back and not be able to sing.

These things aren't to my preference. They're not my preference, I'm sure they're not your preference, and it can just be easy to think, oh, I'm just going to stay at home. But we will miss out on what the Gentile church had.

they had joy from being encouraged by people, encouraged by people who were different to them, but united in Jesus. Being able to love and to be loved by each other.

Maybe we weren't particularly good at either of those things before lockdown. Maybe we weren't good at loving across cultural or theological differences. But when we return, we will have a chance to do that.

To be a community that doesn't say you're different and so you're wrong, but a community that sees past cultural and theological differences, to be a people loved by Jesus.

[35 : 59] When we carefully work through differences, whether they're theological or ethnic, because of our unity in Jesus, we become a community who love each other.

Let me finish with a quote from German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He said, the person who loves their dream, the person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.

Let us be that church. Let me pray. Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you so much for Jesus, that because of him, not only are we forgiven, not only do we have salvation, but that we can have unity with people who are different.

Father, give us slowness to judge, give us awareness of differences, but fill us with love, fill us with love, your love, your sacrificial love, that we would be people who choose to limit our freedom out of love for other people, Lord.

We pray this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.