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Only By Grace Acts 15

A while back I went waterskiing at Lake Merwin. This was before they had changed the water restrictions under the bridge to a “no wake” zone. The water was smooth and so I kept skiing until my arms were aching with pain. Finally I could take no more and threw the rope up signally I was done in. What happened as I threw my ring up was a very sad thing as my wedding ring had apparently worked its way off my knuckle and flew into the murky blue waters never to be found again. Besides feeling dumb for losing the ring, it felt very strange walking around without a wedding ring on. I have known some guys who take off their wedding rings for the wrong reasons, because they don't want to appear to be married in certain settings, or because they are angry with their wife. I had the opposite reaction. I love my wife and I want people to know that I respect my marriage. I want people to know I'm a married man and I felt strange knowing that the absence of an external marker, my wedding ring might be misinterpreted as a statement of my heart.

Certainly we accept that there are markers in life of who we are and what we love. In high school the athletes would wear the letterman's jacket to mark who they were. Skaters wear a certain outfit to mark themselves as to what they enjoy doing. The popular crowd had their brands they were required to wear to set them apart from the rest of the crowd.

Allen Iverson is one of the best basketball players in the world. His body is covered with tattoos, neck, head, arms and legs. An interviewer asked why he did that to himself. Heres a guy who grew up on the streets spent time in jail, but now is making millions in the NBA. He could adopt

any look he wanted. But he said, "What's important to me is my home boys, keeping it real with them. This is the way we look from where I came from." So Iverson puts on the required marks for acceptance.

Its pretty easy to imagine what happened when the Jewish men from Jerusalem came up to Antioch, a church filled with gentiles fresh off the streets and just out of raw paganism. They may have said, "You gentiles used to worship with wicked pagans in a temple filled with idols. You used to do things that are disgustingly sinful. Some of you were sexually promiscuous. Some of you were lazy slackers and lying cheats. You used to wear the clothing that associated you with Roman excess and idol worship. You were hopelessly lost in darkness and despair and then you found out that Jesus died on the cross for you and shed His blood for you because He loved you. He suffered an incredible amount of pain just so He could know you. So why don't you deny what you once were in order to adopt the appearance, the markings of godliness? Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you can't really be saved."

These were Gentiles who god had saved them out of a life of despair and darkness and now they were rejoicing in Christ, but now these men from Jerusalem were telling them that "In order to become a real, fully vested Christian, you must first become a Jew and take on all our external markings that set us apart as God's people. Unless you become a Jew, you are going to stay a second class Christian or maybe not even a Christian at all.

You might imagine that this caused no small conflict in the church of Antioch and many other places. In the first few years, most of the believers were Jewish, but like an only child who must now share a room with his new siblings, new sisters, the Jewish Christians were struggling with this change especially as more and more gentiles came to faith in Christ and the percentage of Gentile believers increased it became an increasingly bigger problem for those in the Jewish tradition. They were

concerned that no one was telling these people to keep the laws of Moses and it was causing conflict.

The Law of Moses had been engrained in Jews since early childhood. And some of them still did not see how Christ's coming had affected the status of the law. It had been drilled into them that the Law was the essence of moral good and holiness and they couldn't imagine that God would set these laws aside. If it was binding for his people then it would follow that it ought to be binding for the gentiles as well as the Jewish people. And even if the Gentiles were exempt from these things then at least they ought to keep the laws to maintain fellowship with the Jewish ones. If Jesus was indeed the Hebrew messiah, anyone wanting his salvation would have to become a Hebrew first. How else could he possibly know the full meaning and purpose of God? These Jewish believers were banding together to make sure that no one slipped my Mount Sinai on the way to Calvary. These were not bad people, their problem was that they stood with one foot in the law of Moses and another foot in Christ's love and now the ground was separating from beneath them and they were being forced to leap one way or the other. They were not about to take the leap without a frantic effort to try and hold the two together. This was causing no small conflict in the early church.

Turn with me to Acts 15 as we read from Lukes account of what happened, keep in mind he is writing to a gentile, most excellent Theophilus. (READ) The external markers of the gentiles were quite a bit different from the Jews and it was causing offense and conflict and made unity and fellowship strained. The issues at stake here were 1) Does God still require his covenant people to keep the law and oral traditions in order to be saved? 2) Even if aspects of the law are a cultural preference for the Jewish people, oughtn't the Gentiles keep them anyway in order to maintain unity and peaceful fellowship between Jews?

The leaders could see this problem was becoming increasingly important. In fact, the leaders were even struggling in this area. Galatians chapter 2 describes a time when Peter himself came to visit Antioch. When he first came to Antioch Peter had no problems eating and interacting with the Gentiles just like he found freedom to eat and drink with Cornelius, Peter may have had his first taste of a ham sandwich and possibly joined his fellow gentiles for a bacon and eggs breakfast. He was rejoicing in his freedom in Christ. But then certain men came from Jerusalem and began preaching the need to follow the law of Moses. So he began to go over and eat only at the Jewish table and no longer ate with the gentiles. Galatians 2 says that even Barnabas got caught up in the act for a while. Until Paul had to publicly straighten Peter out rebuking him before the other believers for his inconsistency. Acts doesn't mention Peters visit, but many people believe it was before Acts 15, because by the time we read Acts 15 Peter has awakened from the error of his prejudice and error of his doctrine. I mention the Galatians 2 passage to highlight that this doesn't seem like a real big deal to us, but to them this was a major source of conflict and even some major leaders in the church were struggling. This was a serious conflict. It was causing relational tension and worse it was weakening a very important point of faith. The doctrine of saved by grace alone was getting heaped upon by too many does and don'ts.

This morning I want us to observe several things. The main point I believe this passage is driving home to us is that I am indeed saved by grace alone. No added markers or additions needed to gain salvation. Second, I want us to see that conflict happens in the church, even among good men and women. Conflict is inevitable but not necessarily bad in itself...in fact I think we see conflict as an opportunity. All through Acts we see a God who is not the least bit afraid or intimidated by conflict. In fact, sometimes it seems he welcomes it as He uses it as a tool to shape, motivate, refine and develop. I don't want us to miss seeing

that conflict will come, but it is an opportunity. As we see the leaders of the church respond well, we are encouraged to see grace extended toward others in action. We see key doctrines of faith solidified. We see how conflict teaches and sharpens our belief. Conflict we see is an opportunity as an opportunity to demonstrate God's grace in our lives by the way we respond. This conflict is a great opportunity for the leaders to stand up and lead well and the followers to respond well and I believe it's a good understanding of grace that helps me walk through conflict well.

So in a passage where I could easily take four weeks to walk us through, I will hopefully hit the main points and direct us to some application we can work on this next week.

The leaders respond well by first recognizing, "Hey there is a problem here." And they also recognize the importance of it. The leaders refuse to ignore the situation and hope it goes away. They care enough to get involved and do something about it. So Paul and Barnabas head down to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders and v.6 "came together to look into this matter". The issue that they were there to discuss was clear. Does God require his people to keep the law in order to be saved and if not should the gentiles follow the law in order to keep peace and fellowship with the Jews who do? The leaders listened to both sides of the issue. V.5 they heard those of the Pharisee sect state their case. I'm sure Paul as a Pharisee could understand what they were feeling, but that in no way lessened his resolve to keep the strong, essential belief of grace clear and untainted by legalism. V. 7 says there was room for "much debate".

Then Peter stands up v.7 As you remember from our past studies in Acts, when Peter stands up he is going to say something worth listening to. Lets read what he says in v.6-11 READ

v.7 Early on God made a choice that I was to take the gospel news to the Gentiles, so they would hear and believe. God gave a witness that this happened by pouring the Holy Spirit inside of them...just exactly

what happened to us v.8 God didn't make them junior Christians or lesser believers. He saved them with the full rights and privileges and cleaned up their hearts by faith. Since God did all of that for them, why are you trying to saddle them down with a law you can't even bear up under? We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in exactly the same way as they also are. This v.11 is truly an amazing statement as you would think Peter a Jew would phrase it in the reverse order. They can be saved just like we us"...but he doesn't. Instead Peter turned it around and said "We believe that by grace even we Jews can be saved...just like the Gentiles." Wow. Peter understood. He got it. Salvation is by grace alone with nothing added. No extra external markers needed. Saved by grace period.

One of the hardest doctrines for people to grasp is that salvation is by grace alone. We always want to add something to it. Some people will say "of course you need the grace of God to be saved, but you still have to do something." Some would say that extra something is baptism. Some would say you must belong to a particular church. Some might require an ecstatic experience. Others might want to add some level of good works or a certain moral standard upheld before admitting full salvation. Peter stands up and proclaims. If you are opposed to salvation by grace alone then you are opposed to God.

To show grace is to extend favor or kindness to one who doesn't deserve it and can never ever earn it. Receiving God's acceptance by grace always stand in sharp contrast to earning it on the basis of works. Every time the through to grace appears there is the idea of its being undeserved. Grace is absolutely and totally free. You will never be asked to pay it back. You couldn't even if you tried. Most of us have trouble with that through because we work for everything we get. We have been schooled by the language of "there ain't no free lunch." "You made your bed...now sleep in it" You scratch my back then I'll scratch yours. I don't get mad...I get even. Finders keepers, losers weepers.

But in this case, grace comes to us free and clear no strings attached. We should not even try to repay it for to do so is insulting. Christ has come and died and thereby satisfied the Fathers demands on sin. All we need to do is claim His grace by accepting the free gift of eternal life. Period. He smiles on us because of His Son's death and resurrection. Isn't grace amazing? (Swindall Grace Awakening)

The people were silent after Peter was done. V12. Paul and Barnabas backed up Peters words by retelling all that God had been doing in the lives and hearts of the gentile people. Then James, the head of the Jerusalem church, the brother of Jesus began to speak. READ v.13-22. James uses scripture to back up what Peter had said and the experiences that Paul and Barnabas just related. James said that according the OT prophets, God's people would consist of two concentric groups. At the core would be Israel "the tabernacle of David" and gathered around them would be all the others, the gentiles "the rest of mankind" who would share as part of the family. James is clear this is God's doing, not mans. This was God's word being fulfilled and the basis of salvation is by grace not works. James explains that Long ago God said in his word that he was going to include the gentiles in his family, so lets get with it!

With salvation by grace alone firmly established, James goes on to make a recommendation to write a letter that includes some essentials for unity of living among Jews and Gentiles. V.19 "Its my opinion that we don't trouble these gentiles that are turning to God with all the burdens of the law of Moses. Here are some things that are essential to unity. Fornication, that's an easy one for us to understand. Clearly sinful. Clearly destructive. And certainly a problem with the new believers learning to live a Christ honoring life. James also tells them. Keep away from things associated with idols. It was usual practice for gentiles to use an idols temple for banquets, celebrations, social and professional groups often met in temples to hold their dinner parties. James says

don't do that. I Corinthians 8 Paul wrote admitting that idols were only so called gods and there was no God but one God. That meat offered to idols was only meat. But it may lead those weaker ones to struggle and fail in their devotion to the one true God. James warned the gentiles who had just been plucked by God from that raw pagan society to be careful not to get involved in activities connected to idols. That included meat that had been strangled and still had the blood in it. Clearly this too is a huge problem for the Jews. We are not totally sure why. It could be that drinking blood was associated with pagan rituals and evil... it was a sticking point with the Jews and James says. If you want to get along. If you want it to go well with you, then if you are tempted to bite into a really rare steak, don't do it. Boil it fry it. Whatever but restrain yourself in order to preserve the fellowship and unity with your Jewish brothers in Christ.

Here is a couple of principles. 1) As a believer under grace, I am not to make non-biblical requirements of others. Specifically those that may come from my cultural tradition. As the Jews were trying to foist their culture on the gentiles and question their salvation if they didn't step in line. We must be careful today about doing the same things to others. How do you treat the modern day gentiles in our church? I have heard people say that because they are single and older they feel like second class Christians and aren't allowed the full privilege as those of us who happened to be married believers. Our church is full of families but the singles who come ought to feel just as loved and cared for. Maybe you have felt like a modern day gentile because you didn't grow up in a strong Christian family? Maybe you feel like a second class Christian because you're newer to the faith? Maybe it's a teen from the community that just came to Christ this year but is still pretty wild in youth group, Awana or Sunday School. They might not have learned to behave the way you would like them to. Maybe you have felt like you aren't fully accepted because you don't hunt or fish or build your own home. Maybe you have

felt excluded because you haven't attended this church for at least 10 years. Our musical preferences? How we dress and whether we like church potlucks or not is our personal taste. We must be very careful about pushing our preferences on others and make them comply before we fully accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

If I kept going it might sound like I'm chewing you out. I think the point is in relationships with other believers we would do well to remember that we are all sinners all get in the same way and that is by grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Knowing that ought to affect the way we treat others.

Second point we can learn from James speak is that because I am under grace, I will gladly restrict my freedom for the sake of others. Nothing intrinsically wrong with eating a rare steak, but James says to boil it down, leave it on the barbecue for an extra couple minutes for the sake of fellowship with the Jews. These are called essential because without them the peace and harmony and unity would be missing from the church. Early church father Melanthon stated "In necessary things, unity (that would include the doctrine of grace. "In necessary things unity. In doubtful things,. liberty, and in all things charity."

The council in Jerusalem sent back this letter to the church in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and even sent some other men who carried some authority with the letter. What did they get besides a very long sermon from these guys? The people at the church of Antioch saw men who cared enough to come read and live out the letter. They made it more than just a sterile email. They came and lived and ate among them and demonstrated as life-sized examples of the truth of grace and to live out the direction the leaders gave. V.48 The people rejoiced when the letter was read. They were probably relieved that the few minor restrictions that James asked them to follow was nothing compared to trying on the burden of the entire law of Moses. I think they also rejoiced to see their leaders respond well, wisely and not ignore the problem, not

to move in heavy handed political edicts and pull rank. I think they saw men that looked to scripture and looked to God for direction and made a reasonable decision with the whole churches unity in mind. Then they saw them taking action and following through. Its how leaders take the opportunity of a conflict and use it to sharpen a key belief. To sharpen character. Its an opportunity for humility. The crisis is an opportunity to sharpen purpose and focus when dealt with well. It's a tremendous opportunity to live out the grace of God in my life.

I was encouraged to see our elders do just that very thing this week. Heres our homework for this next week. Two options. First. Is there someone that God has put into your mind that you might be treating as a modern day Gentile. Someone who is sitting right in this room that you have ignored, excluded, dismissed, never bothered to talk to, never noticed. Simply because they are so very different then you? Ask God what he wants you to do about it. Talk to them? Meal? Smile at them nicely? Listen to their ideas? Actually agree to try one of their ideas? Homework 2. Think of a conflict in your life right now. Ask yourself, "Why might God be allowing this conflict in my life?" Is He trying to teach me something? Sharpen my character? Purpose? Open my eyes to something I've been missing for too long? What is it?

One of the hardest doctrines for people to grasp is the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. This is because we all want to add something to it. People will say “of course you need the grace of God to be saved. No one can save himself. But you still have to do something. Some would say that extra something is baptism. Some would say you must belong to a particular church. Other want to add some level of good works or a certain moral standard. Others add some ecstatic experience.

The first believers were Jews. They had grown up attached to their traditions. They thought that there were certain things that you just had to do to be saved. The early Christians would say it is indeed wonderful that Jesus the Messiah has come. It was what Jews has been looking to for centuries. They would even confess that Jesus died for their sin. Yet some of them said that no one can be saved without being a Jew first of all. In the early days it wasn't such a big problem because there just weren't many gentile believers, but as the missionaries went out and shared the good news a larger percentage of believers were gentiles and it became increasingly a bigger problem for those in the Jewish tradition that nobody was telling these people to keep the laws of Moses. It was causing conflict

The leaders of the church realized they were dealing with an important matter. We need to pray about it and seek the mind of God. We can't afford to ignore it. This affects the essentials of the gospel this is not something that we can just come in and flex our political clout muscles.

Intro: Swindall p104 Luther's fight for grace in the face of rigid tradition. Melanthon's desire for “in necessary things, unity. In doubtful things liberty. In all things, charity.

The fundamentals. Back to the basics. Vince Lombardi p114 Swindall. “Gentlemen this is a football. Don't forget the basics of Christian life. The essentials of salvation. The essential ingredient in salvation is grace, not law. salvation comes by faith in Christ plus...nothing else.

What's wrong with Gentiles believing in Christ. Our churches are mostly full of them now. Swindall p. 105 background on gentile issue. Commission to Cornelius.

Like an only child who must now share a room with new siblings, the Jewish Christians struggled with this change. How do you take to change? Are you flexible when grace makes changes in your own law? Take a test:

The church leaders want to change the style of worship to make the non-Christians feel more comfortable. More resistant or more flexible
You enjoy hosting an annual neighborhood barbecue at your house. This year your spouse wants to invite a new family who is from another culture and speaks little English.
You have teenage children and enjoy having them over to your house Sunday evenings, but the youth pastor wants to start bringing some of the rougher, non-christian teens to the group.

God's grace always challenges us to be open to any change that better communicates the gospel Perhaps he is pushing me to a grace change right now. What would that be?

v.1 men began to teach "unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved." Putting conditions for salvation on top of by grace through faith. Conform to the custom of Moses. You must first become a Jew. Salvation is through the Jews. You must follow the law in order to be saved.

I assume this is still at Antioch? Why the phrase "come down?" wouldn't it be come up from Judea? Strange. Antioch is at lower sea level elevation than Jerusalem.

v.2 Paul and Barnabas disagreed. Big debates. Great dissension with these men. Decided to go to Jerusalem (go up???) and have the apostles and elders make a decision on this issue.

There is a recognized body of head leaders that make stands on certain points, issues of doctrine. Sent out by the church to determine what is right.

Rather than pulling rank as apostles.
Rather than ignoring the issue and hope it all goes away
They decided to openly and honestly discuss the issue

As they were heading to settle a doctrinal dispute they still kept their purpose in focus. They brought joy to those telling of the conversions and reality of the Christ life in these new believers. This brought joy. Undealt with Conflict does not bring joy, it sucks out life.

v.4 Reported to the elders and church all that God had done with them.

v.5 Certain ones from the Pharisee background (Who had believed!) Stood up. "They must get circumcised and direct them to observe the law of Moses."

Why? This insistence? It was so engrained in them since childhood. Here we see there were still some that did not see how Christ's coming had

affected the status of the law. They kept on interpreting God's word in accordance to the Jewish traditions. From birth it had been drilled into them that the law was the essence of moral good and holiness. The Jewish Christians could not imagine that God would set aside these laws. If they were binding for his people then it would follow that they

ought to be binding for the gentiles as well as the Jewish people. And even if Gentiles were exempt from these things then Jewish people certainly were not and if they ate together in fellowship meals, Gentiles ought to keep these laws to maintain fellowship with the Jewish ones.

IF Jesus was the Hebrew Messiah, anyone wanting his salvation would have to become a Hebrew first. How else could he know the full meaning and purpose of God? The Pharisee Christians banded together to make sure that no one slipped by Mount Sinai on the way to Calvary. Olgivie

Two issues at stake here

- 1) Does God still require his covenant people to keep the Law and the oral traditions. (in order to be saved)
- 2) Even if the law is a cultural preference for the Jewish people ought the gentiles keep it anyway to maintain peaceful fellowship?

There was a concern in all this that there not be barriers between fellowship of Gentiles and Jews.

They made the reason for their council clear. They limited it to one issue. They refused to be a committee group that goes around and around and never decides anything or get anything done.

They showed respect for both sides of the issue. Both sides get a fair hearing. They allowed "much debate". Are we as open in our differences of opinion in today's church? Do we have a forum for that to be made possible? Are we as gracious in listening to the other side? 2 tim 2:24 The lord bondservant must not be quarrelsome...

These were not bad people, their problem was that they stood with one foot in Moses law and another foot in Christ's love. And now the ground was separating between them. They were being forced to leap one way or the other but not without a frantic effort to hold the two together. Surely Paul as Pharisee of Pharisee could understand what they were feeling, but that in no way lessened his resolve to keep the essential message of grace clear and untainted by legalism.

v.6 The apostles and elders came together to look into this matter. When the church has a question, the elders are the group to study and pray and determine a direction.

v.7 There is room for “much debate” in decision making.

Peter stood up. “Early on God made a choice that I was take the gospel news to the Gentiles so that they would hear and believe.” God’s the one who can see in their hearts. He gave us a witness by pouring the Holy Spirit inside of them...just exactly like what happened to us. He didn’t make them lesser believers or junior Christians. He made them with full rights and privileges and cleaned up their hearts by faith. Since God did all that why are you heaping on their necks this heavy yoke that none of our fathers, none of us were ever able to bear? Why saddle someone else with a law that you can’t even bear? The law is a school master to lead them to Christ by demonstrating at every turn they were sinners in need o mercy. Gal 3:23 Romans 3:19.

v.11 We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in exactly the same way as they also are. This is an amazing statement as a Jew under the law would say the opposite in the reverse order. They are saved as we are. You would think he would as a Jew say, “They can be just like us” that was the issue in question, but instead Peter turned it around and said, “We believe that by grace even we Jews can be saved just like the Gentiles.”

Amazing Grace Lucado p78 quote from Swindalls Grace awakening.

v.12 people were silent. Listened as P and B related the signs/wonders and all that God had done through them in the Gentiles.

v.13-15 James evidently the head of the Jerusalem church and half brother of Jesus. said ‘listen up brothers” Simeon (Peter????). Yes simon peter used a name logical in the Jerusalem setting). Paul and Barnabas were not the first to go to the gentiles. Peter in fact was before Paul and B ever went on their first missionary journey. Peter has told us how God first decided to take from among the gentile and raise up a people for His name. The prophets agree with this.

James uses scripture to back up what Peter says and what Paul and Barnabas related in their experience with seeing God work in the gentiles.

James was saying that according to the OT prophets, God’s people would consist of two concentric groups. At the core would be Israel “The tabernacle of David” and gathered around them would be the gentiles, “the rest of mankind” who would share the blessings. Everything was happening just as the scriptures predicted.

First point is that this is God's doing, not mans. The Jewish Christians thought they had figured God out. He was a God of law. Who was this new God of grace? James reminded them not to fashion God out of their own preconceived ideas. This has been God's plan all along.

Second point: The word of God is being fulfilled

Third point: The basis is salvation by grace, not the law.

Fourth point

v.16 Amos 9:11-12 God wants to rebuild, restore the temple of David in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord and all the gentiles who are called by My name. This is to prove that gentile salvation apart from circumcision was indeed a OT doctrine. James was asserting that Gentiles will be saved in the millennium when Christ will return and rebuild the nation Israel. NO circumcision needed. If Gentiles will be saved in the kingdom n Age, why should they become Jewish proselytes by circumcision in the church age?

v.19 James, "My opinion is that we don't trouble these gentiles, those who are turning to God with the burdens of the law of Moses.

v.21 Lets encourage them to focus on keeping themselves from things contaminated by idols. Keep from fornication. Keep from things strangled. Keep from blood. For Moses is preached in every city and every Sabbath. We are not going to unnecessarily burden down these non-Jewish believers, but lets tell them to be careful not to get involved in activities connected with idols. Guard the morality of sex in marriage. Don't serve food that is offensive to the Jewish believers, blood for instance. This is basic wisdom from Moses that has been preached and taught in the synagogues for centuries. It was usual practice for gentiles to use an idol's temple for banquets and celebrations. Social and professional groups often met in the temples to hold their dinner parties. Paul condemned the practice of Christians using these I Cor 10:14-22. In Lev.17 there was a Noahic covenant still in effect that God gave people the privilege of eating flesh but the blood must be drained from it.

Clearly this was a huge problem for the Jews. We are not totally sure of why. Drinking of blood was associated with pagan rituals and evil.

James says what follows a strong grace is not license but obedience and love must follow salvation. God's grace gave us freedom but it does not give us freedom to do as we please.

PRINC> #1 As those under grace we are not to make non-biblical requirements of others. Specifically those that come from cultural traditions. Foisting our "Jewish" traditions on others if they are to be

“good” Christians. How we dress. How we run our church. How we do potlucks? Our personal tastes. Our musical preferences. How long our hair is? How short it is. We so easily push our preferences on others and make them comply before we fully accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Hughes p.197 Hendricks on nail polish. “I have repudiated legalism intellectually and theologically in 1946, but in 1982 I am still wrestling with it emotionally.”

PRINC> #2 Because we are under grace, I will gladly restrict my freedom for the sake of others.

Nothing intrinsically wrong with eating your steak rare, but James said to boil it down or eat it well done for the sake of fellowship with the Jews. I Cor 9;19-21 “Though I am free...I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

- 1) Stay away form anything that has to do with idols
- 2) Avoid fornication
- 3) Do not partake of meat that has been strangled or has blood in it.

We can understand the first two, but why the blood/strangle requirement? There were Jews in almost every village and the Gentile converts were not to do anything that would offend the Jews religious scruples.

The restrictions are a burden and also essential. They are a burden because we must limit our freedom to a certain extent out of love for our brother. They are essential because without them they would not promote peace or harmony. This is not capitulation or giving into legalism. This is a love and limits ones freedom because they value unity over rights.

We tend to swing one way or the other. Either swing toward legalism or license. Legalism results in an emphasis on works and the impact is guilt;. License results in an emphasis on self and the impact is offense. One says if you don't achieve, you're a failure.; The other says do it your way and don't worry about the others feelings. In the middle is grace where the emphasis is on what Christ wants and the impact is love

How am I to know when I ought to limit my freedom?

- 1) Is the person who is objecting really trying to grow and make progress in his own spiritual life? Or is he just sitting in the stands heckling those working hard out on the field?

2) How many seem to be affected by my actions of what I feel free to do?

v.22 This all seemed like a good plan to the leaders. So they choose men to send back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. A couple of leading men that carried weight of authority with them. Heres the letter they sent. Why not just send off the letter with a postman? Some people need more then just to see words, they wants to hear the words and see the actions in a life-sized example.

v.23 Hello from us to you.

Some of our brothers came from our church to yours without any instruction on certain issues and have understandably disturbed you with their words.

“It seemed good to us...” having come to an agreement on this to send some men with P and B. These are men who have been tested by trials and opposition. They will be able to tell you about it and answer your questions so that you know P and B are not just making this up on their own.

“It seemed good...” to the Holy Spirit (HS as a prime mover in this discernment of truth.) and to us not to lay greater burdens on you other then these we feel are essentials. Idols. Blood. Things strangled. Fornication. Don't get yourselves tangled in these things and you will do well. Goodbye.

v.30 So they went back to Antioch and got the church all together and read the letter. The letter caused them to rejoice. They saw the letter as very encouraging to them. They were very happy. This is reasonable. We can do this. This make sense. Why were they so encouraged about reading this letter with some dietary restrictions in it? (Illustr. Hughes p.198 Coeds bad letter that was not true set up poor grade)

News that may not sound particularly good sounds terrific if seen from a different perspective. For the believers in Antioch a few minor restrictions in relation to their Hebrew brothers were nothing compared to the burden of the entire law. The letter came as great relief. They rejoiced to see their leaders respond well, wisely and not ignore or move in heavy handed ways. They were seeking God and saw that this was God's hand moving so they responded well to it.

v.32 The men the church of Jerusalem sent up did more then just read a letter, they also exercised their spiritual gifts and strengthened the brothers with a very long sermon.

Paul and Barnabas conflict;

v.33-34 Judas went back home, but Silas “it seemed good” to him to stay there. Paul and B. kept on teaching with many others in Antioch.

v.36 After some days Paul said, “Hey I’m ready for another mission trip. What say we go back and visit some of those same churches and see how they are doing in the Lord?”

v.37 Barnabas thought that was a good idea, but really wanted to take his nephew Mark along with them also. Paul didn’t think this was a good idea at all. Paul had remembered how Mark had deserted them in Pamphilia and gave up and went home when it got too tough. Well this caused a sharp disagreement. Not a mild gentleman’s disagreement, but an intense and passionate conflict.

Morgan’s comment “I am greatly comforted whenever I read this...if I had never read that... Paul and Barnabas has a contention, I should have been afraid. They were not angels....they were men.

Truth is...even the best of Christians do not always agree. All Christians walk withlimps. We all rely on the grace of the Lord.

I could tell stories of Swindall and a Multnomah publisher. Of Jerry Jenkins and Tim Lahay the guys who wrote the Left Behind books.

Sometimes Good Christians intensely disagree.

Luther in a famous self-evaluation “ I am rough, boisterous, stormy, and altogether war like, fighting against innumerable monsters and devils. I am born for the removing of stumps and stones, cutting away thistles and thorns and clearing wild forests.” He was also one of God’s princes.

There is nothing wrong with desiring success per se, but it is from our failures that we learn the most. We sometimes experience what we discern as failure and cannot see the hand of God’s providence. At such times we need to accept God’s direction and entrust our lives anew to Him. We should not seek failure or excuse it, but we can learn from it and grow through it.

Mature Christian believers can disagree about important things. That’s Ok God can use that too as long as they are still seeking God’s heart.

Here we see fallible men with headstrong opinions that sometimes clashed. The Bible doesn’t candy coats its heroes.

- 1) Disagreements are inevitable. It’s a part of being human we are all wired differently and have different opinions.
- 2) Even godly people will disagree at times. Disagreement is not a sign of carnality. We can disagree without being disagreeable. In fact I am amazed how god reserves the right to use people who disagree with me.

- 3) A disagreement includes an issue and various viewpoints of the same issue. It can help us to understand and see the other side of their viewpoint. Both sides will probably have some valid points. Work hard at seeing both sides of the issue. This is hard work because our pride is at stake. We become myopic seeing only our own opinion.
- 4) When both sides have support seek a wise compromise
- 5) Augsburgers four perspectives on conflict p.129 Swindall

* I see conflict as a fixed matter

v.40 Here the disagreement caused them to double their missionary efforts. Barnabas and Mark went one way, and Paul chose Silas and went another way. Both groups were committed by the church to the grace of the Lord.

Paul was task oriented Barnabas people oriented. Barnabas a man of compassion. Paul a man of conviction. Barnabas a builder of men. Paul a planter of churches. Paul looking at the good of the overall ministry. Barnabas looking at good of the man.

“sharp disagreement” Paroxysm our English word is transliterated letter for letter from Greek and means “a fit, attack, sudden increase of symptoms of a disease. It is a convulsion, a violent emotion.

Who was right? No one can fault Barnabas for wanting to give John Mark a second chance. Nor can we fault Paul for fearing to trust him again on this important venture.

Even the closest of friendships can be tenuous. God did not cause the disagreement, but used it to guide both men into increased fruitfulness and service. They were now two missionary teams instead of just one. Silas brought to Paul's ministry some things that Barnabas did not have. He was a Roman citizen. He was a prophet. He probably spoke greek. He served as Paul's stenographer. Barnabas was a great loss to Paul but Silas was also a great gain.

Often it is through our difficulties and failures that God lead increased creativity and productivity. Phillip Brooks one of the greatest preachers America has ever produced failed miserably as a school teacher. He did not like his students and they did not like him. “I do not know what will become of me and I don not care much...I wish I were fifteen years old again. I believe I might become a stunning man; but somehow or other I do not seem in the way to come to much now. There is nothing wrong with being constantly successful, but we seem to learn most from our failures. This does not mean we ought to seek failure or excuse it, only when it comes we can learn from it and grow through it.

Hughes:

It was a worthy idea to retrace those first missionary steps, he and Barnabus had made a great missionary team and it was worth doing again. Barnabus's relational skills coupled with Paul's mastery of the Law and his brilliant intellect produced dramatic results. These guys were soul brothers sharing both vision and wounds.

They would meet and encourage new believers, reprove false teaching and teach more about God's grace as they also bring the good news of the results of the Jerusalem council. Paul and Barnabus were not going to make the mistake of failing to follow up on their evangelism efforts. But something redirected Paul's ministry keeping it in line with God's hidden agenda heading him to Europe instead of back to Antioch. Paul probably didn't understand all that happened until much later when Barnabus and he sat down for a little talk.

So Barnabus sailed away with John Mark to his native Cyprus, Paul

Main points:

Its grace alone. Conflict sharpened this truth after a decade of doing church. We are saved by grace.

The unity of the church was safeguarded

Evangelism to the gentiles could proceed without hindrance

We make our decisions from God's word as our first source.

There is some direction for how a church ought to deal with conflict.

Helps to have leadership that listens to God.

People follow leadership.

How can different cultures coexist. Unity is important.

Conflict will arise. How are we going to deal with it?

God can use conflict to sharpen our theology and direct our resources and efforts. We need to be careful about reacting too negatively to this conflict.

Unity doesn't come from compromise. It's when we come together and seek what God wants.

Leadership exercises a humble but strong oversight of the problem. They didn't ignore it. They didn't pull a power trip. It was God seeking leadership. It was more about what God wanted than what they personally wanted.

Why the letter? Don't make others stumble. Dial it back on the behavior so your brother doesn't stumble.

Unity comes from common ground, not from hiding things.

Leadership and oversight is important for the health and oversight of the church.

Application:

To what extent are my lifestyle and religious customs required for all Christians and what extent are they cultural and personal preferences?

Missionaries today still have to decide what aspects of a person's lifestyle are inconsistent with Christianity and what aspects are acceptable even though they may seem strange with Western Christianity?

Why do you think they felt it necessary for them to go out in teams? How might this strategy apply to us?

What practices have some folks added to the gospel message?

How can we guard against expecting more of new Christians than God expects?

How can we determine if the requirements for faith taught in our churches are from God or from people?

Timeless truths:

- 1) No conflict is ever easy. They require flexibility and sensitivity. We must wisely distinguish what is essential to the faith while at the same time maintaining unity and liberty.
- 2) All conflict can be beneficial. Disagreements can be good for a church. They can sharpen our understanding of the truth and chisel away traditions that may dull our ability to communicate the gospel. A church without questioning people will lose its effectiveness in society and the members will be ineffective.
- 3) Conflict call for honest appraisal. The Jerusalem Christians had to ask themselves the hard question "do we really believe in God's grace?" Are we trusting in Christ or our religion for our salvation? Why can't we accept the gentiles? Could there be some prejudice lurking in our veins? Arrogance?

Applic. Do we welcome modern day gentiles into our fellowship? Those who talk differently? Look differently Those whose pasts are littered with sin and failure? Do we exclude single people? Do we shun those who are divorcees? Rough edged new converts? Are we willing to listen to their opinions? Really listen?