

GETTING IT RIGHT
ACTS 15.1-35

I have this heavy theological question I want to ask you.
Why do lion tamers carry a stool when they go into the lions cage?

They have their pistols and whips I understand, but why a stool?
I learned this week the stool is actually the most important tool of the trainer.

You see as the trainer holds the seat
and thrusts the legs towards the face of the lion,
and the lion becomes confused.

It becomes confused because it tries to focus
on all four legs at once,
and it can't do it.
The lion actually loses its focus and becomes confused.

It might growl a little bit and throw out a paw
but the lion basically becomes tame, weak, and disabled.

We have so many demands upon us these days.
So many things thrust in our face.
There are the demands of home, school, church, work, and even play.

And then add to that the desires of our hearts,
the whims of the world, and the deception of the devil.

We might lift our voices in praise once and awhile or open the Book,
but for the most part, it is just too easy for to become confused and lose focus.

We don't want to lose focus and become feeble in our faith, do we?
We don't want to find ourselves tame, weak, and disabled, do we?

Don't we want to become wise, strong, and able
devoted followers of Jesus Christ who want to serve him willingly and well?

Today we leave our summer series
of "Life in the Promised Land," the period of the judges,
and fast forward about 1200 years or so
to the birth and development of the early church.

We hope this series helps each of us,
whether long time members or new seekers,
whether children or confirmation students, people in the pew or pastors;

we hope this series help us keep our focus on the essentials of our faith,
helps us grow as devoted disciples of Jesus Christ,
and helps us be better able to witness to our family, friends, and the world.

In the Book of Acts we read that the church, less than 20 years
after the death and resurrection of Jesus is still growing.

You'd think everything was just hunky dory,
 everyone was getting along with everyone else,
 and they were living happily ever after.
 NOT!!!

The church was growing and with growing comes, growing pains.
 And those growing pains sometimes spawn confusion, crisis, or controversy.

The early converts were all Jewish,
 sooo their theology, their thinking about God,
 and their teaching had a distinct Jewish flavor.

AH, TRADITION.

Acts 15.1-2, **"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch
 and were teaching the brothers: '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."

No, do not hear that tradition is all bad.
 We've undermined and discarded tradition far too much in our culture today.

Tradition is important because it says something about who we are
 and where we come from.
 It doesn't completely define us, but it is basic to our identity.

Tradition provides structure and security,
 Tradition gives us something to fall back on and a base to grow from.

So, you ask, what is the problem then?
 Isn't this just a difference of opinion?
 Isn't it ok to have a difference of opinion?

Yes, it is ok to have a difference of opinion,
 but this issue wasn't just about a difference of opinion.

It wasn't about worship wars that some churches have.
 You know, whether the liturgy is more formal or informal,
 structured or less structured,
 or whether we sing hymns or praise songs,
 or whether we use drums and guitars or organ.

And it wasn't about those hotly debated issues which really shouldn't be so hot,
 like the color of the bathroom carpet in the 3rd floor restroom of the synagogue.
 Hey, you shouldn't even have carpet.
 It should be tile or stone, right?

And the problem wasn't some person pushing their agenda,
 needing control, or liking or not liking someone else.

Most of the decisions made in the circumstances above
 are driven by preference, personality, and appreciation.

At stake for the early church and for us today
was and is a more basic, fundamental, and actually essential issue.
How is a person saved?
They needed to get it right and we need to get it right.

Here is the context of the issue.
Since most of the first Christians were Jewish,
they had come to rightly believe in Jesus for their salvation,
but some, the some we later learn are from the political party, Pharisees...
but some were teaching that their Jewish customs, rites, and rituals
must still be an essential part of their faith,
a must to them and a must
in the faith of the Gentiles, the non-Jewish Christians.

These are the “conservatives” of their faith and time,
They were simply seeking to defend their doctrine, follow their Bible,
the Old Testament, the law, and the rules, rituals and rites of their faith.

They believed they had it right,
and they want the new Gentile converts to get it right.

The Gospel to them was a, Jesus Plus Gospel.
They are in essence saying, yes, you have to trust Jesus,
BUT you have to worship like us and do the things we do to be saved.

Then, there are liberals of their time, Paul and Barnabas.
They are Jewish.
They have experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ.
as prophesied in the Old Testament,
as guided by the Holy Spirit,

But they are saying the rules, rituals, and rites,
like circumcision are not necessary for salvation.

The Gospel is not Jesus Plus, it's Jesus period.

The Gospel, simply put is that you are a sinner
and Jesus in his love for you died for your sins,
accept that, embrace that, and live that.

Sounds good, sounds too good to be true.
It does but it is.
It is one of the few things in life that sound too good to be true that is true.

Know that and know this, Jesus loves you as you are but
loves you too much to leave you as you are.

And Paul and Barnabas also teach us that once one is saved that person has a responsibility to live as a Christian that right doctrine should inspire right duty, that right belief should spawn right behavior.

So, some of the rules, rituals, and rites of their time will carry over to help us work out our salvation with fear and trembling, will help us to have a living faith as well as a saving faith.

And will help us not to abuse our new found freedom, will help us not to use this liberty as license to do whatever we feel like doing.

Jesus would agree with that. In Matthew 5.17 he says, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come to fulfill them.”**

And as we continue to think about it he made it tougher seeking to purify our thought life and motives as well, Matthew 7.21-22, **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder... But I tell you anyone who is angry with a brother will be subject to judgment.”**

7.27, **“You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery. I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”**

Paul and Barnabas wanted to make sure the new and old converts to Christianity got it right.

There is a cart and there is a horse, and the horse comes before the cart. Paul says it this way in Ephesians 2.8-10, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith And this not from yourselves, it is a gift of God- Not by works, so no one can boast.**

For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So, there are these two opposing perspectives. What to do?

Set up a committee.
Call for a conference.
Let’s call it a counsel.
Let’s talk it out.

That is what they did.

The meeting itself was and is very significant in the life of the church. It’s called the Jerusalem Council.

IT is one of the most controversial and pivotal events of the early church.

The Pharisees are there in full force to present their perspective.
Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James,
the big names in the Christian movement are there to confront them.

Here are a few minutes of that meeting,
Acts 15.5b, The Pharisees present their point of view,
**“The Gentiles must be circumcised
and required to obey the law of Moses.”**

Peter, as usual is the first to challenge.
In verses 7-8 he make reference to his vision,
he says that God knows the hearts of these Gentiles,
accepts them, and has given them the Holy Spirit too.

IN verse 9 Peter adds, **“he purified (cleansed) their hearts by faith,”**
And then tongue in cheek he asks the Pharisees
why would they want to put this burden on the new Gentile converts,
why would they want to make the Gospel something it isn't.

But the bottom line is, he wants them to get it right
Verse 11, **“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus
that we are saved, just as they are.”**

Ah, grace. A quick definition.
IT's when you're given something wonderful and you didn't deserve it or earn it.

(Dennis the Menace story or Philip Yancy story)
I know many of you have heard the Doug Anderson story
from Dennis the Menace before.
It is so simple, and so accurate in it's description of grace.

Dennis and Joey are at the Wilson's.
Mrs. Wilson offers cookies, freshly baked cookies.
(we can see the aroma)
They stuff their mouths and scoop up as many cookies as they can carry.
In between bites Joey says, “We must be good for Mrs. Wilson to give us these cookies.”
Dennis says, “No, it's not that we are good. Mrs. Wilson is good.”

Let's reconvene the conference,
Verse 12 tells us there was a hush in the crowd.
Then Paul and Barnabas speak.
They tell,
**“about all the miraculous signs and wonders
God had done among the Gentiles through them.”**

Interesting isn't it?
When people are telling stories of changed life,
other people are really listening.
Know your story is important and will witness to others.

Now James, Jesus' brother, and pastor of the Jerusalem church has the floor.
He appealed to the words of Amos (great strategy) in their Bible saying
that God would restore the family of God
with the faithful Jews and the new Gentile believers.

Then he passes his verdict in verse 19,

"It is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."

Thus the basic doctrine of "saved by faith" prevailed.

But remember sound doctrine also leads to duty.

Right belief leads to right behavior.

So James continues,

"Instead we should write to them..."

In that letter James reminded them and reminds us of two commandments,
to avoid idolatry (keep your focus on God) and to avoid sexual immorality.
Both the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians would understand that.

Sexual immorality breaks down trust which is essential in relationships.

That dilutes the faith and destroys the witness, doesn't it.

Oh for a return to the obedience of God-give boundaries to our sexual behavior.

James also suggested two concession of the Gentiles to the Jews,
to avoid eating meat from strangled animals and the meat sacrificed to idols.
Why, verse 21,

**"for Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times
and is read in the synagogue on every Sabbath."**

We might simply say that it is a matter of respect and hospitality.

If you invited someone over for dinner and knew there were certain foods
they couldn't eat, wouldn't you out of respect not serve those foods.

So the idea of putting the decision, the commandments, and the concessions
in a letter and making it known to the Gentiles
was suggested, accepted, and the letter was sent.

They got it right.

The unity of the church was preserved,
the witness of the church was strengthen,
and the truth of the Gospel was taught.

They got it right that we might get it right.

So to make sure we keep getting it right,
to make sure we keep our focus,
and to continue to strengthen and encourage us in faith

We encourage you to look at this list of growth opportunities...
There are Sunday School Classes, Bible Studies, and Small Group.
Then at the leading of the Holy Spirit,
choose one to be a part of through this church year.
Let us pray.

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