As we return to our journey through the book of Acts, we rejoin what is known as the “Jerusalem Council.” The elders and apostles in the Jerusalem church, along with Paul and Barnabas, have assembled to consider what requirements, if any, should be placed upon the Gentiles (non-Jews) who are now coming to Christ in large numbers. They have assembled because a contentious dispute arose in the church in Antioch when some men from the Jerusalem church had come to Antioch saying “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” So we will zoom in once again as the Jerusalem council considers this question: Should the Gentile believers be required to undergo circumcision and keep the law of Moses in order to be counted as those who have been saved by Jesus?

Last Sunday we concluded with Peter’s remarks to the council, and that’s where we’ll pick up the story beginning with Acts 15:11-21 (I will preach through vs. 31, but we will not read aloud all 20 verses on account of time).

Now, before I jump into the text, let me remind you of why this topic is relevant and remains incredibly important for those of us in the 21st century who care little about the subject of circumcision. Two relevant questions remain very much the same today as they did then: what are the conditions required for salvation? In other words, what is the relationship between the saving grace of Jesus and the requirements of God’s law? And what about the Jews? Are they not God’s chosen people to whom God entrusted the law and the prophets? Clearly Jesus was a Jew, and He fulfilled all the Jewish prophecies regarding the coming of the Jewish Messiah. So what is the relationship between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers?

As we look to our text, Peter speaks to these questions and summarizes his conclusion in vs. 11, “We believe that we [the Jewish believers] will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [the Gentile believers] will.” Peter articulates here in Acts 15 one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith: we are all saved by grace alone. Peter’s conclusion is both shocking to his audience and yet indicative of what the Holy Spirit was doing in the new age of the Messiah: God was cleansing the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles through faith in Jesus…salvation was coming upon all who called upon Jesus with no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Thus Peter recommends that the Gentile believers NOT be burdened with the Jewish law and customs as “conditions for salvation.”

Luke records in vs. 12 that the assembly fell silent for a time as those in the room no doubt prayed and considered what Peter just said. Then, Paul and Barnabas jump in. We read in vs. 12,
“And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.” Remember that the signs and wonders always pointed to God’s work through the power of the Holy Spirit. For example: when the crippled man in Lystra, who had a simple faith in the name of Jesus, is then dramatically healed…clearly the Holy Spirit is at work among the Gentiles. These are the kinds of stories that Paul and Barnabas are relating to the council.

The next person to speak is James. Before we look at what James says, let me give you a little background on who James is.

If you are familiar with the Gospel accounts, you will remember that the three apostles most commonly mentioned are Peter, James, and John. We learn from Mark 10:35 that James and John were brothers, commonly known as the sons of Zebedee, Now, the James that Luke refers to here in the Jerusalem council cannot possibly be James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, because we read earlier in Acts 12 that “Herod…killed James the brother of John with the sword…”

So, who is this man James who now speaks with such authority in the Jerusalem Council? There are two possibilities. Among the twelve apostles chosen by Christ there was another man named James, who was identified as the son of Alphaeus. He is traditionally known as “James the Younger” whereas James the brother of John is known as “James the Greater.” We know little about James the Younger, but it is certainly possible that he has taken a place of leadership in the Jerusalem church. There is, however, another man named James in the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Mark who is listed as one of the brothers of Jesus (see Mark 6:3). Paul refers to James, the brother of Jesus in Galatians 1:19, “I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother…” Most of church history agrees that the man serving as bishop over the Jerusalem Council is none other than James, the brother of Jesus, who will become known by the early church as “James the Just.” It is also thought that James the brother of Jesus is the one who authored the book of James in the New Testament. The early church fathers such as Eusebius, Jerome, Hegesippus, and Clement all refer to James the Just, the brother of Jesus, as the one placed in leadership over the Jerusalem Council. They also describe James as ascetic, scrupulous, and incredibly devoted to prayer. Tradition maintains that his knees were allegedly callused like those of a camel because of his many hours of prayer. It is also said that he was martyred in AD 62 by being thrown off the top of the temple and then beaten to death with clubs.

Returning to our text here in Acts 15, let’s read what James has to say beginning with vs. 13:

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.
James begins by affirming what Peter, who he calls by his Jewish name, “Simeon,” has already said: that God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name.

James says a lot in that sentence. Here’s what he is saying: “God…on His own initiative through Christ…has visited the Gentiles in order to call and identify for Himself a laos…a people, who will be known by his name. In most cases, the Greek term laos is reserved for the nation Israel as “the people called by my name.” So how is it that now the Gentiles are being considered “the people called by God’s name?” James says…look to the prophets! This is the fulfillment of all that was predicted.

James weaves together passages taken largely from Amos 9:11-12:

15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 “‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.’

According to the Old Testament prophets, says James, God’s people will come to consist of two concentric groups. At the core will be Israel (“the tent of David”), and gathered around them will be the Gentiles (“the remnant of mankind”), who will share the messianic blessings without becoming Jewish proselytes because they are “called by my name.” Thus everything that is happening is just as the Scriptures prophesied (see Hughes, Acts: The Church Afire, p 195).

This picture of the restoration of Israel leading to the inclusion of the Gentiles and the inclusion of the Gentiles leading to the prosperity of Israel is a common theme throughout the Old Testament prophecies. Such is why there need always be a mutual, respectful, and necessary relationship between those Gentiles who have been grafted in to the promises of God through Christ, and the Jews who were chosen by God and given the covenants, the law, the prophets, and the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth.

Because James understands the conversion of Gentiles as a fulfillment of prophecy, he renders his judgment as the leader of the council beginning in vs. 19:

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”
The judgment of James is twofold. First, the Jewish-Christians should not “trouble” the Gentile believers with any additional “conditions” regarding their salvation. In essence, James is agreeing with Peter: we are saved by grace alone…we are saved because we are a people called and forgiven through the name of Jesus, whether we be Jew or Gentile, and that is God’s doing…not ours. Since we have been saved by grace, we should not trouble people who are turning back to God with additional conditions or requirements regarding their salvation.

However, says, James, we should write to these new believers who come from a pagan background and advise them regarding how they should live so as to bear a faithful witness.

In other words, though we are saved by grace…and precisely because we are saved by grace…we should gladly restrict our freedom for the sake of our witness to the world. James provides four specific instructions for the Gentile believers. First, they should abstain from all those things that have been polluted by idols. Is that a condition for salvation? No. It is a consequence of their salvation. In other words, those who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ are inevitably those who recognize the offense it is to the one True God to partake in those things that have been sacrificed and dedicated to idols. Now think about that as it applies to our 21st century culture. Are we still those who should abstain from things polluted by idols? Yes indeed we are.

A few years ago I was speaking with a very close friend who leads a dynamic Christian ministry here in Kansas City. He was telling me about a man who had contacted him about making a large donation to his organization, a donation with A LOT of zeros behind it! The offer came at a time of great need in his ministry, yet my friend felt moved by the Holy Spirit to hold off and pray about the offer before he accepted it. Through prayer my friend felt led to do some research on the donor. Before long it became evident that the man had become wealthy through some very questionable means, and the donation he was looking to make was money that was “polluted” by idols. Based upon the teachings of the New Testament, my friend understood that as one saved by grace, his witness to the world and his faithfulness to Christ would require him to reject this huge amount of money. Was that a condition of his salvation? Not at all. His decision to reject the “polluted” money was a consequence of his salvation…it was the right thing to do in order to protect his integrity and his witness as a Jesus-follower.

Next, James instructs the new believers to abstain from sexual immorality. Is that a condition that must be met before they can be saved? No, but those who are saved by grace should not live as those who remain a slave to the desires of their libido. Remember, the Gentiles did not grow up with any kind of a sexual ethic, so James is encouraging them to live as those who have been set apart by the grace of Jesus Christ. Those who have Jesus Christ in them are those who will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, live more and more a life that is pleasing to God, a life that does
not conform to the patterns of this world (Romans 12:2). Again, a changed life is the consequence of salvation, not a condition for salvation.

The last two items may strike you as odd. James instructs the Gentile believers to abstain from what has been strangled and from blood. Does that mean that Jesus-followers cannot order their steaks RARE? I sure hope not! I usually tell the waitress to take the cow for a quick run around the parking lot and drop it on my plate!

Here’s the point that James is making with these words of instruction: if the Gentile believers eat meat from animals that have been strangled, or they drink the blood of animals or eat uncooked meat, they will absolutely shut down their Jewish neighbors. Any hopes of finding unity in the name of Jesus will be shot to bits if the Gentiles engage in behavior that is blatantly and unapologetically offensive to the Jews.

Most of you know that cows are considered sacred in India because the Hindus think of cows as gods. Now, as an American Christian, I disagree with that practice and I find that concept to be somewhat ridiculous. But it’s not ridiculous when you are in India…not at all…to the extent that when you go to McDonalds, there is not one single beef product on the menu. In fact, there is not any beef product on any menu in India unless you happen to be staying at a very western hotel chain.

Now, if I go to India in hopes of reaching the Hindus, and while I’m telling them about Jesus I whip out a pack of beef jerky, what have I done? I have so offended their cultural senses that any hopes of leading them to Jesus is lost completely. So…when I’m in India, I don’t make jokes about the cows laying in the middle of the road; and I don’t eat beef jerky; and I do my best to honor their cultural norms so as to earn an audience and win them to Christ. Paul articulates how the Christian restricts his freedom to win souls in 1 Corinthians 9:19-21:

19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

This is, in essence, what James is proposing to the Gentile converts... ”Please do not live in such a way that blatantly offends the Jewish brothers or compromises our opportunity to win the Jews back to Christ. Please do not live in such a way that directly contradicts the Jewish teaching that has been taught by the Jews in synagogues throughout the ancient world.” Again, are these dietary restrictions a condition for Gentiles to be saved? Not at all. But because they have been saved by grace…because they have been grafted into the promises of the Old Testament through
faith in the Messiah, they should live in a way that does not offend their Jewish brothers if at all possible.

After James wraps up his statement, Luke reports in vvs. 22-31:

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers[a] who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you[b] with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

Just a few things here: First, notice that the theological controversy was handled extremely well via the council in Jerusalem. They did not have to take a vote…they found consensus through prayer, debate, scripture, and discernment. James writes to the church in Antioch that they “have come to one accord.” Such outcomes are not always possible, but I will tell you that more often than not, our elders will wrangle, pray, seek direction from scripture, and eventually come to a discernment that looks a lot more like “one accord consensus” than a vote that leaves some people to be winners and others to be losers. That is as it should be.

Notice also that the church in Antioch rejoices at the encouragement from the council. They do not chafe at the requirements that come from the elders and the apostles because they realize that these requirements are not “conditions for their salvation” as the other men had taught; rather these requirements are simply the natural “consequences of salvation”—they are meant for Christian living only after they have already been saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

Again…one who has been saved by the unmerited grace of Jesus on the cross and filled with the Holy Spirit should have no qualms with the consequences of their salvation such as spiritual
direction, discipline, and the challenge to live a life set apart. For one who was dead but now is alive…for one who was blind but now can see…for one who was lost but now is found…such requirements are a privilege and a gift…an opportunity to express our gratitude and our devotion to the One who died in our place…they are opportunities to earn an audience with those who desperately need to hear the good news of the Gospel and be saved.

Church, in closing, let us be careful to never confuse the “consequences of salvation” as somehow those things that serve as “conditions for salvation.” You get that, right? And let us commit ourselves once again to living out the consequences of our salvation…that we should be recognized in this world as those belonging to Jesus not only because of our freedom in Christ, but also because of our willingness to restrict our freedoms in order to reach a hurting world. Let us seek to maintain the unity of the church and preserve the glorious doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith. Let us lay no greater burden upon those who are already burdened; instead, let us throw open our doors and seek out those who need to know the love of God and the freedom of a saved life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let’s pray.