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## *On the Move: Unifying* Acts 15

Last week Larry called us to pray. I hope some of you have taken him up on the challenge to pray 15 minutes a day. I know that the specific prayer of asking, "Holy Spirit, move in \_\_\_\_\_" (*fill in the blank*) has formed my prayer life as I have prayed for the Holy Spirit to move in bringing healing, joy and rest to specific people this week.

Today's passage is Acts 15, and it is going to force us to ask, "Which passages of the Bible do we still need to obey?" and "Which do we get to say are relevant only to an ancient culture?" I know I've been having a lot of conversations about this, so I encourage you to take notes, and keep track of these principles and study tips. I hope we can find, in Acts 15 today, a starting place for how to study Scripture and to know God's perfect and unchanging will for his Church. So let's start by praying.

The Acts 15 conflict is over what makes someone "saved." And if one group is right, then 2,000 years of religious practice will be overturned. Let me go ahead and give away the answer to how the Spirit is on the move. The Holy Spirit moves in the biggest potential inner-church conflict and moves by unifying to what is **good**.

Did you hear that?? Who has ever lived through church conflict? Hands? If you're hand's down, you haven't been in church long enough. Seriously in Acts 15 we see that when the Spirit is on the Move, the Spirit moves by unifying us to what is **good!**

Open your Bibles to Acts 15. I am going to summarize some of these sections, so follow along with me. The controversy is presented in the first five verses of Acts 15. The Jewish followers of Jesus have a legitimate concern: the Good News of Jesus is going out as planned to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. So here's their concern in verse 1, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

This was a legitimate concern, because we see that circumcision is a life and death matter in the Old Testament! I'm not going to get into it too much, but God instituted circumcision in Genesis 17 and said, "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people." This is what we call a nonnegotiable, and it sounds like a pretty permanent arrangement for being in relationship with God. So yes! They are rightly concerned that these Gentiles can't possibly be in God's family unless they're circumcised.

Here's what happens next in Acts 15:2. "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question." Then there's a meeting where they hash out God's will as it regards whether or not this 2,000 year tradition—from God!—will stand. Big Deal. Sharp dispute. Can the Gentiles be saved without the act of circumcision?

Peter takes the first stab at the question. As we read his argument, listen for theology... that is, what he knows of God, and also listen for experience... how they are experiencing God's movement. We're going to build our interpretive skills. Verse 7: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers 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."

Hear the theological argument. Peter appeals to what God has revealed about his own character. He says, "God knows the heart." He knows this from the Bible. We can look at 1 Kings 8, 1 Chronicles 28, Psalm 44, Jeremiah 17, and Luke 16... among others. He has built an understanding of the character of God from Scripture, and appeals, then, to what he knows to be true of God: God knows the heart. So theologically, when we approach issues of salvation, Peter appeals first to who he knows God to be and recognizes that circumcision is an issue of the flesh when God is looking at the heart.

Then he appeals to an experiential argument. In verse 7 he tells them to remember that God sent him to the Gentiles that they might hear the Gospel and believe. He's talking about Acts 10; remember when he visits Cornelius? Now our way of experiential arguments today sound something like: "Remember when I met Cornelius, the Gentile? He loved God and is generous, so he must be saved!" No, his experiential argument is that he is experiencing God consistently: God gave his Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just like he gave to the Jews at Pentecost.

Therefore, verse 11, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." So the Gentiles being saved without circumcision is consistent first, theologically and second, experientially.

Then in verse 16 James adds a biblical argument. He quotes the prophet Amos in verses 16-18 by reminding them that all the prophets promised that God would call Gentiles to himself! The whole of the biblical witness anticipated a day when Gentiles would know God. So we've heard theological, experiential, and biblical witness that yes, the Gentiles can be and are saved without circumcision in the

flesh. The Holy Spirit moves by unifying them to what is good (Good News!)... salvation is available to all.

So James concludes in verse 19: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." So the verdict is a "no" on continuing to practice circumcision of flesh as an issue of salvation, because, as Peter said in verse 9, God has now purified their hearts through faith. Circumcision was necessary as a marker in the flesh that people belonged to God. Now, God has made a marker on people's hearts. It is a mark of faith, a mark we now symbolize through baptism. *[Come to the membership class on August 9<sup>th</sup> if you want to hash that out some more.]*

The Good News that has brought unity confirms: God has not changed. His way of salvation has not changed. All people—Jews and Gentiles—are saved by faith just as they always have been. The way he's in relationship with us hasn't changed. Circumcision is still necessary, but God has now through Jesus circumcised peoples' hearts, so the fleshly circumcision isn't necessary.

The result is that everyone adopts James' resolution, and they write a letter to be sent out throughout the world. Let's read the finale of the letter in verse 28: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things."

So the verdict is that the Spirit moved by unifying them with Good News—you are saved by grace through faith—but that news comes with some caveats that give us more of an opportunity to practice the interpretative skills we just learned. So now 2,000 years later, do **we** still have to follow the restrictions of food and sexual immorality? Track with me here. We are going to see that the Spirit moves us to Good News, and finally to good life, and you will do well if you then, who are saved by the Creator, listen to what the Creator who loves you has said is good for you.

So let's see why James cherry-picked food issues and sexual immorality to include in this passage. I could not figure out why these made the list. So I did some serious study this week. And I used only tools that you have at your disposal as well, because I wanted to make sure you were equipped to handle the same questions that you might have with how our culture is picking and choosing Scripture that it wants to follow today. I did not go into the Greek or any fancy stack of big fat books from school; I just used this study Bible.

Before we go anywhere else, we need to read and understand what is right around this passage. The very next verse after these prohibitions is verse 21. It begins with "for" which is a strong transition word in the Greek (the notes at the bottom of the study Bible told me this). We are to abstain from food and sexual immorality for, or because of, verse 21, "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest

times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” Because in every city there are Jewish followers of Jesus who still follow the laws of Moses, for their sake, don’t be offensive about the food you eat. What would be at stake here? Unity. For the sake of unity among all the believers, just don’t eat the meat. Keep these food laws, and you will do well.

Now I doubt there are many in the room who keep kosher, so we might think this is a done deal, but I want us to see where these issues are together in scripture and why they might require a different application for each.

Let’s do some biblical work to find out where else Scripture talks about these laws together. There are cross-references in the margin of a study Bible that direct you to other places where Scripture talks about the same things. Within verse 21 one of the letters directed me to 1 Corinthians 6:12—turn there with me. Just glance in these paragraphs and you see both the food laws and sexual immorality both mentioned. So this is relevant for us!

Acts 15:21 says don’t eat food for the sake of unity. And here Paul seems to be saying the same thing in verse 12 and 13. “Everything is permissible for me but not everything is beneficial...Food for the stomach and stomach for food—but God will destroy them both.” Food, Paul says, is a temporary thing and permissible but not always beneficial. So we conclude between these passages (and others we don’t have time for right now) that as far as food laws are in force, they do appear to be a matter of cultural sensitivity. They’re held for the sake of unity in that day, because the law of Moses was still being read and followed. But even 10 years later, Paul is waxing on this issue. Think about it—how could there be joint meals like we see in the beginning of Acts if Gentile believers won’t concede the Jewish consciousness about meat? When you put Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians together, it does appear to be lawful for us to eat meat just as it was for Paul, just so long we aren’t causing offense or if we don’t live somewhere with a lot of Jesus-following, Jewish potlucks. So go ahead and eat your raw steak if you want.

Keep looking at 1 Corinthians 6:13. Paul nails the case about food; but in the same verse about the food issues going away, Paul mentions sexual immorality. We need to examine whether or not we can leave behind this instruction about how the good life says no to sexual immorality. And Paul makes a distinction between this law and the food laws.

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body... (v15) Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? (v18) ...Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually, sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

Sometimes we have to take others' advice on what is good for us. I failed my first sugar test this week. So I went in on Friday and found out how to prick my finger and make sure my sugar levels are under control. Perhaps I won't be allowed to eat sugar the rest of the pregnancy or will have to exercise—even though I more painfully waddle—more these days. My midwife isn't giving me rules to intentionally limit me. These rules are so that I will thrive and not have a giant-headed baby I can't bring into this world.

Just like I don't like the diabetic guidelines, you might not like what the Bible has to say about sexual immorality. So let's use our new interpretative skills and see just how culturally bound this rule is. First, theologically: The issue of sex began as an issue of what it means to be "in the image of God" back in Genesis 1. God made male and female in his image and gave them to one another, and that union was to speak something of who God is. So the union of one man and one woman speaks to us something of God. Theologically, the nature of God has not changed. There is no new image-bearer or image union for God.

Second, experientially: We see no consistency in how, by the Holy Spirit, God moved to bring healing and signs and wonders and tongues among the Jews and the Gentiles... with how God has not moved among sexually immoral communities. He has not, for instance, poured out his presence in the midst of an orgy. So this has not changed.

Finally, biblically: Nowhere—this is an absolute—is there permissible language anywhere in the Scriptures giving us leeway regarding sexual immorality. In fact, like with Paul here who gives a sentence and a half to food and paragraphs to sexual immorality, the language regarding sexual immorality consists of consistent and persistent absolute language and long lists of just what that includes. And so if we go back to all our study options that we learned from Peter and James—theologically, experientially, biblically—we have no permission to engage in sexual immorality. What is sexual immorality? Scripture tells us what it is. It is any kind of sexual activity engaged outside of marriage.

Look at Scripture to see what it includes. It includes cohabitation. In John 4, when Jesus encounters the woman divorced from 5 husbands and living with her boyfriend, he extends grace and living water to her. And then he says, "Go and sin no more." Then in John 8, when he encounters the woman caught in adultery, he has no condemnation for her but does say, "Go and leave your life of sin." It is not good for you to be sleeping with someone who is not your spouse. Pornography is not directly listed in scripture because it didn't exist in its present form, thanks be to God. And yet, I guarantee you it is sexual immorality. It is not good for you, and here's why: In all of these circumstances—cohabitating, adultery and pornography—you are uniting yourself with someone (in pornography, that's a real someone on the other side of that image) that is not your spouse. Look back at 1 Corinthians 6:19. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit, you are joined to the spirit of the Lord. And so when you go outside your marriage for sexual fulfillment, you

unite the spirit of God in an unholy, impermissible act. Do you see how serious this is?

I'm not standing here to condemn you. I simply echo Paul, writing to this church in Corinth. Later in 2 Corinthians when he says, "I fear that when I come to you I will not find you as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder." I know that I don't stand before you faultless.

Paul continues and said, "I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced." And so even as a sinner standing before you, I tell you that it grieves me as your pastor, and I mourn over many of you who have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality and sensuality that you have practiced and are practicing. I grieve, not because I don't believe you legitimately follow Jesus and are a member of his family. By grace you have been saved through faith. The Spirit moves us to Good News! Praise be to God! But I mourn for you missing the Good Life he brings. I see how your pornography addiction is fueling a sex industry which enslaves our teenage girls. And you are eroding the self-esteem of your daughters. And I see how your cohabitation now is eroding your security and trust in one another. If and when you do get married, statistics say that your risk for divorce is so much higher because you both already have your list of reasons why this relationship could end up not working. And I mourn. We do not do well because we do not avoid these things.

You're probably squirming. I am, too, and yet when the disciples sent this message out to the people—when they sent the message that you don't have to be circumcised but you do have to abstain from this food and sexual immorality—do you know what they did? They rejoiced. Look at Acts 15: 31. They rejoiced because of its encouragement. And the handlers of the letter were sent back to Jerusalem with peace. If you are squirming and not rejoicing, I invite you to repent and to enter into the Good Life that the Spirit, who dwells inside of you, welcomes you into. Just speak to Jesus and say, "I'm sorry. Purify my heart, and Holy Spirit, move me to the Good Life."

Repentance moves us to unity. When we are humbled, we see that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God and are together inheritors of God's grace. So I pray that the Holy Spirit moves us in prayer and repentance to his good unity.

When this letter was delivered, its handlers didn't just drop the news and disappear. They stayed and encouraged the church. And we are staying, too. If you need encouragement, we are here with resources for you. If you want to come and pray, just come up right after the service. If you need to talk with someone, call us tomorrow and we can set you up with a lay counselor. Or if you're cohabitating, we can set you up with pre-marriage counseling. If you need to deal with a long life

of sexual immorality, come to Celebrate Recovery Thursday at 6:30pm. You'll find there a community of people who are willing to repent right along with you.

It is Good News that your Creator, the Father, has purified your heart and set up good boundary lines for you to flourish in. It is Good News that the Son, Jesus, fulfilled the law completely, died and rose again so that you may be saved by grace alone. It is Good News that the Holy Spirit has come to dwell within you, that you might always have the presence of God within you. If this is new, Good News for you today, I invite you to speak to Jesus and say, "Move me with your Good News. I know I have been bought and my life is not my own. I want to belong to you and to be in your family."

We are to rejoice! And be encouraged! God has made a way for us to be in relationship with Him and to thrive. And this Good News, my friends, has not changed.

May the Holy Spirit unify us as we hear afresh the Good News that unites us all: For there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:22-24). God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our sin, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4-6)... through faith. This is not your own doing; it is the free gift of God, not a result of works so that no man can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus said, I have come that you might have life, and life abundantly (John 10:10). For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son; that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).