

Law And Gospel: Final Answer (Part 2) – Acts 15:1-35

Let's turn in our Bibles to Acts 15.

The year is 49AD, and the occasion is the Jerusalem Council. Recording one of the most significant decisions in all the Bible.

How the Old Testament Law relates to the Gospel, and our life.

And we found in Part 1, that . . .

The Gospel is worth fighting for. (v1-5) And . . .

We are saved by grace through faith, not works. (v6-11)

Truths just as important today as they were then. But the main point, the *final* answer regarding the Law and Gospel, is yet to come. Starting in v12.

➤ [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.* [Peter had just shared *his* experience, and now it was their turn.] [13] *After they finished speaking, James replied* [still responding to the statement in v5 by the believers who were Pharisees; that “*It is necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles] and to order them to keep the law of Moses.*” That’s what James is replying to. Saying . . .]

“*Brothers, listen to me. [14] Simeon [Peter] has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name* [how he saved some of them for his glory]. [15] *And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written* [in Amos 9; where God says] [16] “*After this* [after he judges the house of Israel, the people of old; which he did in 722BC when the Assyrians overthrew them] . . .

[After that, God said] *I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen* [the rule and reign of someone from the Davidic line]; *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 [18] known from of old.*’

James is like, “Everything Peter and Paul are saying agrees with the Old Testament prophets. Namely, that God’s plan all *along* has been to include the Gentiles.” “And now we’re seeing it.”

[19] *Therefore* [he says; and this is the point of the whole chapter] *my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, [20] 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. [21] For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.*”

James, leader of the church that he was, cuts through all the confusion and debate, and bottom lines it with 3 principles.

The first, is found in v19 – *we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.* Meaning, in the context of the debate . . .

We are free from the particulars and consequences of the Law. (v19)

That’s what James is referring to when he says, *we should not trouble* people who put their faith in Jesus. We shouldn’t trouble them to keep the Old Testament Law.

We’re *saved* by grace, and *kept* by grace. The Law doesn’t apply like it used to.

It’s obsolete when it comes to our salvation. Just like it says in Heb 8:13 – *In speaking of a new covenant, he [God] makes the first one obsolete.*

The first covenant, governed by the Law, is no longer operative.

Which is why Paul said in Rom 7:6 – *we are released from the Law.*

And asked in **Gal 3:3** – *Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?* Having been saved by the work of the Spirit . . .

Are you being sanctified by works of the Law?

No! *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse* he says. (Gal 3:10)

The law was our guardian [guiding and protecting us from ourselves], *but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.* (Gal 3:24-25).

We’re free. Free from the particulars and consequences. But . . .

We are not free from the principles of the Law. (v20)

Which is what James is getting at in v20.

My judgment [he says] *is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, [20] 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.*

We’re free from the particulars and consequences of the Law, but we can’t just toss it out the window and forget about it. We can’t just ignore its ethic for living.

That’s the idea of the laws he cites. And not just any laws.

➤ They were well known standards of human decency referred to as the Noachian Decrees; the decrees given to Noah, or based on his experience, in Gen 9. Stay away from idolatry, stay away from blood, and stay away from sexual immorality. And the fact that they were given to Noah, means that they *pre-date* the Law; by centuries. Implying that they apply *regardless* of the Law. Before *and* after it. That’s the first point James is making. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The second, is that the *principles* of the Law still apply. Because these very same decrees were *incorporated* into the Law . . .

And attached to some foundational *principles*. Principles for living.

They’re found in Lev 17-18, starting with *things polluted by idols* as James says it.

It’s a prohibition based on the *principle* that we shouldn’t associate with demonic evil.

That’s the connection made in Lev 17:7.

Or to say it in the positive, **be holy**.

We’re *free* from the Law, yes, but we’re not free to associate with evil. Stay away.

He cites the practice, things polluted by idols, to convey the principle and the timelessness, in one fell swoop.

And the same is true of his prohibition against *sexual immorality*. To say, **be pure**.

Don’t indulge in things like incest, homosexuality, bestiality, or sex outside of marriage. Again, from Lev 17. Those things are impure. Stay away.

And 3rd, when he says *abstain from what has been strangled, and from blood*, it’s an exhortation to **be reverent**. To honor what’s sacred.

Because in God’s eyes, blood equals life. The life of an animal is in its blood, Gen 9:4.

Just like the life of a *person* is in their blood.

And since that lifeblood is *given* by God, it’s *sacred* to God. And under the Law, it was reserved for *sacrifice* to God.

All of which is why we show such reverence at Communion, The Lord's Table.
Because the blood of Jesus, of all blood, is sacred.

Be holy, be pure, and be reverent. Standards of human decency that started with Noah,
continued with the Law, and still apply in principle.
That's the second thought James conveys.

But there's a third here based on v21:

Sometimes it's necessary to sacrifice our freedom in Christ, for the sake of our unity in Christ. (v21)

Having just said that Gentiles are held to the *principles* of the Law, he tells us why. V21.
For [or because] from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

Because there were Jews throughout the Roman Empire, and because they had practiced
the Law for centuries, they might very well be *offended* by this new-found freedom.
It might violate their conscience and turn them *off* to the Gospel. Or cause them to
stumble if they've already embraced it.

So don't go there James says. For the sake of their soul, and the unity of the body,
Gentiles might need to sacrifice some of their freedoms.
They might need to abide by some of the particulars, out of deference to others.

➤ It's the very thing Paul went on to say to *all* of us, in his letter to the Romans 9 years
later. **Rom 14:20-21**
Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. [21] It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

While the *Law* prevented Jews from eating certain foods, in *Christ* that's no longer true.
But old habits and old convictions die hard. Then *and* now.
And it's wrong to cause turmoil in another brother or sister who *struggles* with such
freedom. In fact, it's wrong to do *anything* that causes them to stumble.
Anything that bothers their conscience. Anything that weakens their faith.
Anything, that influences them to indulge in something they think is wrong.

Like taking someone to a movie if it compromises their scruples.
Like horror flicks for me. I hate horror flicks. I hate the evil, and I hate the fear.
Not only that, but I can't reconcile it with Philippians 4:8 – That we should think on
things that are pure, lovely, commendable, and excellent.

Same goes for ultimate fighting. I hate the violence. It bothers me.
And if I were a new believer, it would be wrong for you to invite me over for a "fight
night." Or try to get me to see a scary movie.

Or how about drinking in front of a former alcoholic; of any maturity?
Or with someone who doesn't have the self-control to *stop* before they get drunk?
Causing them to stumble.
If they're not strong enough to enjoy the freedom in a God-honoring way, or strong
enough in their faith to be okay with *your* freedom, it's wrong. For you.

And not just because it causes them to stumble, but because it *divides* you.*****

Sometimes it's necessary to sacrifice your freedom in Christ, for the sake of our unity in
Christ.

➤ Now, does that mean mature believers are forever *inhibited* in their God-honoring
freedom? No. **Rom 14:3**.
*Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats. Or drinks. Or watches.
For the kingdom of God [Paul goes on to say] is not a matter of eating and drinking, but
of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Rom 14:17)*
We need not feel *trapped* by the convictions of others.*****
But sometimes, it's necessary to sacrifice. May we always be sensitive. **(Summary)**

That brings us to v22-35, where the council *implements* their decision, and demonstrates
in the process that . . .

Good discipleship doesn't just happen. (v22-35)

That's the final point. V22.

*[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 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 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."*

This is a case study in good discipleship. Where the Apostles and Elders had something to
say, something to teach, and revealed some key ingredients to succeed.
Starting with wise leaders.

Good discipleship . . .

• **It requires wise leaders. (v22-23,26)**

Men and women with more than just a *passion* for the Gospel, but the wisdom to
disseminate it, spread it. Like the apostles and elders.
Who first of all built consensus; *with the whole church*, v22.
And then, they chose some *other* wise leaders to *accompany* Paul & Barnabas.
Proven men and *leading men* (22), who had *risked their lives* for the Gospel (26).
They selected carefully.

All of which not only bolstered and *supported* Paul and Barnabas, but may have
preempted some doubt on the part of the church in Antioch; if they came back alone.
It was wise. Good discipleship requires wise leaders who build consensus, select
carefully, and think ahead.

Second . . .

- **It requires clear communication. (v23-29)**

There's a little saying among preachers that, "A mist in the pulpit creates a fog in the pews." In other words, if it's not clear up here, it's going to be even worse out there. And the same is true of writing. Which is why the leaders in Jerusalem drafted a cover letter of sorts, that was clear, concise, and to the point. They reviewed the situation, described the process, cited the source – the Holy Spirit (28) – and stated the conclusion. All in one paragraph. 169 words. Because good discipleship requires clear communication.

And then last . . .

- **It requires faithful follow-through. (v30-35)**

[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. [32] And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets [speakers of truth], encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. [33] And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them [in Jerusalem]. [35] But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

You might notice that v34 is missing. Which says, "It seemed good to Silas to remain there." It's left out of good translations, or at least noted . . .

Because it doesn't *exist* in the earliest manuscripts. It's a holdover from the King James version in 1611, that was based on later manuscripts. The oldest ones don't have it.

But the point here, is that the leaders sent to Antioch, followed through. Faithfully.

Not only delivering the letter and initial *message*, but sticking around to encourage and strengthen the church *with many words*. (32)

And Paul and Barnabas did the same. They followed up.

Which *has* to be one of most difficult aspects of discipleship – sticking with it. For both the teachers *and* students, leaders *and* followers.

Everybody *starts* all gung-ho; but few finish. And if the leader doesn't, nobody will.

➤ I gave my sons-in-law the book *Spiritual Leadership* by Oswald Sanders for Christmas last year, and wrote a note to each of them on the inside cover.

And among other things, I offered to spend an hour each week working through it via zoom, video conference. Just a dedicated time for discipleship.

And we just finished it yesterday. One of the best things I've done with them.

But boy did it test my resolve. And theirs too. Getting started was easy. Finishing was work. But that's what it takes if we're going to grow in the Lord and influence others. All the wisdom and communication in the world matters not one bit, if there's no follow through. (**Summary**)

So tuck this away as the ministry year starts, and you get involved in a Discipleship Group. Make a commitment right now, to be faithful.

To finish just as strong as you start. Because good discipleship doesn't just happen.

And as you do, live free in Christ. Resting in God's grace, and honoring him with all holiness, purity, and reverence. Final answer.

Prayer – Lord, thank you for the Gospel, grace, freedom, and even the Law. Find us faithful to live accordingly, and faithful to grow. All we want is you, Jesus. To know you and follow you. And to the extent that's not true, make it so. Narrow our passions.

Close – **Guest Central.** Elder/Deacon Prayer.