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ACTS

NOTHING BUT JESUS ACTS 15

I. CULTURAL CHANGE

- A. Cultural change – how do you go about it?
 - 1. Everyone would agree change is needed, but people can't seem to agree on how to go about it
 - 2. Through legislation, through social media, reaching the youth, community centric programs – where should we focus our attention and efforts?
 - 3. It is not our primary responsibility to change our culture but, if we fulfill the mission of Jesus our culture will change
 - a) Acts 15 is wonderful example of that – the early church didn't set out to transform the ancient Greco-Roman world, but they did
- B. Confession – I hate purity conferences
 - 1. A broad statement I know but I really can't stand them
 - 2. Growing up in a Christian home I have been to my share of them – as both a student and as a youth pastor
 - 3. Don't get me wrong, the intentions of the facilitators seem well placed – who doesn't want our young people to remain sexually pure?
 - a) But the means to that end always seemed off
- C. They were all very similar
 - 1. They would start out with a true statement - God wants you to remain sexually pure before marriage
 - a) And then we would take part in some very exciting activities
 - b) Tear pieces off a heart, Tear pieces of a rose, roll the dice to see what STD you would contract
 - c) There were some sweet parts to it, dads giving their daughters purity rings but most of it just felt it was missing the mark, based in fear
 - 2. It wasn't until later in life that I put my finger on what was troubling me – we were telling the kids that their greatest need is morality instead of teaching them their greatest need is Jesus
 - a) Purity isn't found in our own good works, purity is found in the only one who is truly pure, Jesus Christ – as scripture tells us our feeble attempt at righteousness is like dirty rags
 - b) **2 Cor 5:21 - For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**
- D. That kind of thinking permeates the church today – so much so that a term has been coined for it - Moralistic (doing what is right or good) therapeutic (a treatment) deism (God is real but detached from humanity)
 - 1. Term was created by Christian sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton.
 - 2. Used to describe what they consider to be the common religious beliefs among American youth.
 - a) Having worked with youth for over 12 years of my life I would say they are pretty spot on
 - 3. After interviewing approximately 3,000 teenagers they found that many young people share a few common moral beliefs:

- a) A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
 - b) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
 - c) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
 - d) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
 - e) Good people go to heaven when they die.
 - (1) These are widely held beliefs regardless of your age. What's missing? Jesus!
- E. The problem with these purity conferences – I think somewhere down the line we lost confidence that the gospel can transform people's lives
- 1. So we began pushing morality over a genuine faith in Jesus, a dependence on Jesus
 - 2. In Acts 15, fresh off their first missionary, Paul and Barnabas run into the same thing
 - a) Men attempting to bring New Testament Christians back under the law
 - b) Telling born again Gentiles that they are not really saved, they must become Jews first and then and only then can they truly follow Jesus
 - 3.

II. A RETURN TO THE LAW

Act 15:1-5 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (2) Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. (3) So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. (4) And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. (5) But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

- A. In the last chapter, Paul was stoned and on the verge of death
 - 1. Next day he was preaching – bloodied and beaten
 - 2. Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God – a message that he was living through
 - a) Not a popular message today – the message of the cross before the crown, sharing in the sufferings of Christ, the death of Christ and then we share in the life of Christ
 - b) You will endure persecutions and many hardships – in this world you will have many trials but be of good cheer I have overcome the world
 - c) That was the message of the early church
- B. Now in Chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch worshiping with their brothers and sisters
 - 1. There is great joy in the church – rapid growth, lives being changed, eyes being opened, the Spirit of God is moving
 - 2. A group of men stand up to share and say – unless you are circumcised, you're not saved
 - a) You can imagine the air leaving the room – wait, what!? There are certainly Gentiles there that have experienced a radical transformation and now they are being told that change never happened.
 - 3. Really what these men from Judea were saying was faith in Jesus is not enough to be saved – you need more

- a) This is a big deal. The way of salvation is now at stake, the true message of the gospel has now been called into question
 - b) I haven't come across many people today adding the fine print of circumcision to the gospel, but I have seen many other things added
 - (1) You have to be part of this church, or you have to be baptized, you have to speak in tongues, you have to....fill in the blank
- C. Before we demonize these men let's not forget the significance of the law and circumcision
 - 1. Neither were man made traditions – they were covenants made with God and by God
 - 2. In the Old Testament circumcision was the way Israelites were set apart as the people of God
 - a) The distinguishing mark that they believed in the promises and covenants of God
 - 3. The law was the framework of a lifestyle that set them apart from an unbelieving world
 - a) It made sense to them that converted Gentiles would have to adopt these practices to be a part of God's family
 - 4. Is that what Jesus taught?
 - a) Matt 9:16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. 17 Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."
 - (1) That was really just the tip of the iceberg – Jesus explained He was the fulfillment of the law
- D. Paul and Barnabas knew exactly what was on the line here – the truth of the gospel
 - 1. Remember it was Paul who wrote in Romans - If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.
 - a) Well at this moment it wasn't possible, He couldn't keep silent, the truth of the gospel was on the line
 - 2. It's been said we often major in the minors and minor in the majors
 - a) Meaning – that we tend to compromise on the big, important matters in life and fight for the minor things (what was your last argument about?)
 - b) This matter was too important – it had to be settled - Do Gentiles have to become Jewish to be made right with God? To be saved?

III. SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

(6) Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. (7) And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. (8) So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, (9) and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. (10) Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? (11) But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

- A. Back in Jerusalem this issue of circumcision has the potential to divide the early church
 - 1. Scary reality that it wasn't outside persecution that posed the biggest threat to the church, but inward division
 - 2. Apostles and elders gathered together - what must a man do to be saved?
- B. Who is the first to stand up? Peter.

1. Early on in Jesus' ministry this would have caused us to cringe, but this is a different Peter (same man, different heart).
 2. Refers back to his time with Cornelius – God had sent him to Cornelius to share the gospel with him and his family
 - a) Peter says I simply preached Jesus to them. I didn't forbid them to eat pork, or prime rib, I didn't get out a knife and say I need all the men to form a single file line
 - b) And guess what, they believed and they received the Holy Spirit.
 - c) Jon Courson writes this *"Although we're to be fishers of men, the problem with so many Christians today is that they are trying to clean the fish before they catch them. In reality, it is not until after men are hooked on Christ and brought into the boat of salvation that their hearts will change. Therefore, the great need of our world, our communities, and our families is not reformation but regeneration. (Symptom vs Sickness)*
 - d) Justification before sanctification, not the other way around
- C. Peter brings it home with this statement – "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"
1. Uses language that Jesus used – Jesus said my yoke is easy and my burden is light
 - a) When there is disagreement, it is always best to fall back on the words of Jesus, not tradition
 2. Peter asks why are you trying to bring these believers under the bondage of the law?
 - a) The law that our fathers and even ourselves can't seem to follow, have you read the Old Testament?
 3. We have a history of heaping burdens on people that we ourselves cannot carry
 - a) Truth weighed heavy on all those who were gathered together – this is what Jesus said, and this is what Jesus has done

IV. JAMES SPEAKS UP

(12) Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. (13) And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: (14) Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. (15) And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: (16) 'AFTER THIS I WILL RETURN AND WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID, WHICH HAS FALLEN DOWN; I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL SET IT UP; (17) SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, EVEN ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, SAYS THE LORD WHO DOES ALL THESE THINGS.' (18) *"Known to God from eternity are all His works. (19) Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, (20) but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. (21) For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."* 22 *Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment— 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men 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 will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

- A. James speaks up. James, the brother of Jesus, who at this time seems to be the moderator and the leader of the church in Jerusalem
1. Same James who authored the book of James. A book in which the central theme is a genuine faith and trust in Jesus produces good works.
 2. “God visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name” this type of language would have originally been reserved for Israel in the Old Testament, pretty significant
 3. James points the crowd’s attention to the Old Testament book of Amos and repeats these prophetic words
 - a) The rest of mankind can seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles
 - b) We all have opinions but in the end the only thing that matters is what the Word of God says.
 - c) James says “I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” Essentially, we shall not burden them under the law
 - d) We write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.
 - (1) Didn’t James just contradict himself in the very same sentence?
- B. This request to the Gentiles is no longer based in the law but grounded in love
1. Paul has a great deal to say about this throughout his letters to the churches
 2. 1 Cor 8 – Paul writes about the meat sacrificed to idols. He says we know that idols are worthless and powerless, there is only one true God and meat is meat.
 3. **1Co 8:7-13 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (8) But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. (9) But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. (10) For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? (11) And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? (12) But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. (13) Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.**
 4. He goes on in **1Co 10:31-33 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (32) Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, (33) just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.**
 - a) It was no longer an issue of legalism but an issue of love – make straight the path to Jesus
 5. There’s nothing wrong with rules born out of love. (Church policy)
 - a) It’s a wonderful thing when we can say “My rights are gladly laid down for your good”
 - b) We want to be a stepping stone to Jesus, not a stumbling block. In our freedom we must remain sensitive.

- C. This is where I would like to make my case regarding societal change – this gathering, this letter, it is all about what a man must do to be saved
1. Abstain from sexual immorality – why this in particular?
 2. Let's talk about sexuality in the Greco-Roman world - From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity by Kyle Harper's
 - a) Marriage was seen as honorable – Roman women had a great deal of rights – laws against rape and forced marriage
 - b) Those laws only extended to Roman citizens – 20% of the Roman empire's population were slaves – first century AD 10 million people
 - c) Harper writes "Prostitution was ubiquitous and uncontroversial. It was seen as a proper outlet for a man's sexual energy. If a man had sex with prostitutes before marriage, he could still be counted a virgin. If he had sex with prostitutes during marriage, it was not considered adultery. One Christian bishop described Roman sexual policy as "forbidding adulteries, building brothels."
 - (1) Slaves were considered as much their master's property in sexual terms as they were economically.
 - d) There was a strong sexual element in much of Roman religion. Many religious ceremonies celebrated prostitution.
 - e) Homosexuality was also considered unremarkable, certainly among men - in fact, there were no Latin words to differentiate between same-sex and different-sex desire.
 - f) The Romans wrote about sex in their **literature**, comedy, letters, speeches and poetry. There seems to have been no low-culture taboo attached to writing.
 - g) Roman art is filled with images that would today be regarded as pornographic. In **Pompeii**, erotic mosaics and statues were found not only in known brothels and bath houses which may have been places of business for prostitutes, but also in private residences, where they are given pride of place. There are erotically-charged objects almost everywhere in the city.
 - h) One piece of literature tells of travel to the afterlife where the Isle of the Blessed is described as "all the wives are shared in common without jealousy. . . and all the boys submit to their pursuers without resistance"
 - i) Children were protected from sexual activity, but only if they were freeborn Roman citizens.
- D. This is the culture that the early church is born into
1. It is in this society that James tells these new believers – let God's word define sexuality
 2. These Christians took that to heart – As they adopted biblical views regarding sex – these activities were no longer harmless, innocent outlets for male sexual desire outside of marriage. There is simply no avoiding the conclusion that Christianity presented a sexual ethic that was radically new.
 3. Harper argues that Christian sexuality led to a new understanding of the freedom of the will. In Christian morality, humans possessed moral agency over their sexual drive. Even men, it was believed, could exert control over their erotic experiences. No one was simply at the mercy of insatiable appetites and "normal" sexual overflow.
 - a) Christianity redefined Roman monogamy to eliminate any other kind of sexual experience. Harper says two doctrines emerged as essential to Christian marriage that marked it off from the rest of the Roman world: sexual exclusivity and firm opposition to divorce and remarriage.

- b) The most astonishing development of late antiquity is the transformation of a radical sexual ideology, for centuries the possession of a small, strident band of vociferous dissenters, into a culture, a broadly shared public framework of values and meaning”
 - c) One author writes “Christianity went from cult to culture in part because the sexual ethic was considered better and safer and more freeing for more people. Obviously, not everyone found Christian morality to be an improvement on traditional Roman standards. But Christian ethics meant a profoundly improved lot in life for women, children, the enslaved, and the poor. The changes came slowly—over centuries, not over years and decades—but changes did come.”
4. I don't think the early church had any idea of the impact that exhortation would have

30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. 32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. 33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. 34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. (36) Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." (37) Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. (38) But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. (39) Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; (40) but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. (41) And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

V. CONCLUSION

Gal 2:18-21 For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. (19) For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. (20) I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (21) I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

A. Story of the millionaire

1. Story of the Multimillionaire and his wealth – when I was first married I was extremely poor. Took the only nickel I had and bought an apple. Shined it sold it for a dime. Bought two apples with the dime, shined them both, sold them for 20 cents, bought 4 apples shined them all, sold them for 40 cents – I kept doing this until I had made \$1.60, then my wife's father died and he left us millions of dollars