

Acts 15:1-21

Breaking The Chains Of Legalism And Licentiousness

Learning Objectives

- To show how the Gospel frees us from “to do” lists.
- To show how the Gospel also gives us wisdom about certain boundaries we should keep.

Pray for your time together as a small group.

? Did you have any rules growing up that your friends didn't have? What were some of them? How did your friends react when you told them?

Optional Transition: In our study, we're going to talk about “rules” that were being taught to some believers in the early church and how Paul, Barnabas, and other leaders responded.

Part 1: Jesus + Circumcision = Salvation?!

Read Out Loud: Acts 15:1-11 (NIV)

¹ Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” 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. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “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. ⁸ God, who

knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have

What Is A Yoke?

According to the dictionary: “Fitted on the neck of oxen for the purpose of binding to them the traces by which they might draw the plough, etc.” This is also used in Scripture as a metaphor for bondage or affliction (Leviticus 26:13, 1 Kings 12:4, Isaiah 47:6, Lamentations 1:14, 3:27). A yoke is used to describe servanthood in Matthew 11:29-30, Acts 15:10, and Galatians 5:1.

been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Leaders’ Note: We could easily see your group getting lost in the weeds of what specifically is “overly legalistic” or “overly licentious” while discussing this passage. Try to keep your discussion from going too far in one direction or the other. Our goal is to focus on the tools God gives us to hold those two sides in tension with each other.

? What led to the conflict between Paul, Barnabas, and the men from Judea? Why was their teaching so controversial?

Possible Answers: Vs. 2, they were saying that unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved. It was controversial because they were still saying that the Gentile believers needed to obey the Old Testament Law in order to be saved.

? In what ways did Paul, Barnabas, and the apostles seek to bring clarity on this issue? Are there certain things we can learn from how they handled this situation?

Possible Answers: They sought wise council (Peter and the other apostles) to confirm that the Gospel was enough. Seek Scripture for guidance and direction. We can also seek godly counsel like they did.

? What was the yoke that the Jewish believers were trying to add to the Gentiles’ way of obtaining salvation?

Possible Answer: They were adding their Jewish law to how people got saved. The Jews recognized that salvation was through grace alone in Christ, so why should they add something else to the Gentiles to be saved?

? Why do you think it was so hard for these Jews to let go of their regulations/traditions?

Possible Answers: Not only was this something that they and their families had been doing for thousands of years, they are also things that God had told them to do to show they were in the covenant with Him.

The Heart And Importance Of Circumcision

Genesis 17:10-11 says, “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised...and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” This was the old covenant that God made with Abraham for Israel. But now, under the new covenant through Jesus, the sign is not just a physical one like it was for Israel, but it is a matter of the heart. Romans 2:28-29a says, “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”

? A yoke for us today would be adding something to the Gospel. What requirements do Christians tend to add to the Gospel as a means for salvation? What particular “additions” do you (or have you in the past) wrestle with?

Possible Answers: Have to go to church, be baptized, go through confirmation, have your good works out way the bad.

Leaders’ Note: Keep in mind, this is what people require for salvation. We will look at laws people put on others to act like a Christian later. If your group wants to look at this more, please reference the “Jesus + Nothing = Everything” sermon series for further clarification.

? Why is it a problem for us to add anything to the Gospel (vs. 10)?

Possible Answer: When we add something to the Gospel, then the Gospel is no longer about a gift of grace (Eph. 2:7-8), it is now about me trying to earn my salvation. Either through religious living or moral standing.

Part 2: Laws? Or No Laws?

Read Out Loud: Acts 15:12-21 (NIV)

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me.¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “‘After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’—

¹⁸ things known from long ago.

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

? Why do you think it was so important for James to mention that the prophets wanted to include the Gentiles (vv. 14 - 18)?

Possible Answer: To show the Jews that it was in God’s heart to also make the Gentiles a part of the family and show no distinction between race/culture.

? Why would James ask the Gentiles to adhere to some of the old Jewish laws, even though they were not required to obey them in order to be a true follower of Jesus?

Possible Answer: There are certain weaknesses that people have that are different from others. This may be due to their nature and how they are as a person, and this may be due to how they were raised. The Jews were used to obeying certain laws, and even though it wasn't required for salvation, it was hard for them to all of a sudden change what they had done all their lives, like dietary restrictions, when the Gentiles never had any restrictions.

? How does this passage highlight the importance of fellowship for believers, regardless of background or personal preferences? What are some ways in which your background has influenced how you view the actions of other Christians?

Possible Answer: We are the body of Christ. It makes no difference whether someone is different in any capacity, what matters is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So we should be willing to set our preferences aside in order to help others know God.

Leaders' Note: Depending on your background you may expect to see a certain type of service, dress code, music style, programs, etc.

Read Out Loud:

In his commentary on Acts, F. F. Bruce observes, "While there was no more question requiring the Gentiles to submit to the ceremonial law [Circumcision as a mark of the covenant], they would do well to behave considerately to their 'weaker brethren' of Jewish birth...James gave it as his considered opinion that they should be asked to respect their Jewish brother's scruples by avoiding meat which had idolatrous associations or from which the blood had not been properly drained, and by conforming to the high Jewish code of relations between the sexes instead of remaining content with the lower pagan standards to which they have been accustomed. This would smooth the path of social and table fellowship between the Christians of Jewish and Gentile birth."

? What are some personal judgments/convictions we place on ourselves that do not determine our salvation, but protect us from falling into temptation or leading others into temptations? Optional

Re-Phrasing: What are some situations in which we should ask the question, "is this wise?"

Possible Answers: Not dressing provocatively. Don't drink or smoke, or listen to secular music.

For Discussion And Accountability

? Are there things in your life that you are putting on yourself or others are putting on you that make you think God will love you more? What are they?

? Do you rest in the fact that there is nothing that you can do that will change how much God loves you? Or do you tend to think of yourself as worse/better than others? Why is that?