



"How Do We Make Decisions"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 15:1-21

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The Council at Jerusalem

¹ Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "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 brothers 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 obey 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 made no distinction 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 the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have 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."

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon^[a] has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 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 remnant of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things^[b]

¹⁸ that have been known for ages.^[c]

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 Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 15:14](#) Greek *Simeon*, a variant of *Simon*; that is, Peter
- b. [Acts 15:17](#) Amos 9:11,12



Introduction.

When Lorie and I were engaged many years ago, we went about the task that all engaged couples do of getting ready for married life. One of those tasks was selecting a stoneware pattern for our everyday dishes, so one day we went to a department store and began looking in the home furnishing section. It wasn't long before we started to have a disagreement, and we couldn't agree on the pattern. Following our little trip to the department store, and our little tiff, I was back at the seminary cafeteria eating lunch with my fellow students, and I related to them the incident.

After listening to me talk about the whole matter as I self-righteously described how I, as a modern man, thought I should have a say about the plates we purchased, a friend of mine named Allan listened for a while, and then he said, "Peter, when people come over to your apartment for dinner, and they sit down at your table for a nice meal, and they look at the table beautifully set, and they admire the stoneware on the table, do you think that any one of them is going to turn to you and say, "My, Peter, what a beautiful table setting this is!'" Of course not! They are going to turn to Lorie and say that, because the stoneware is more of a reflection on the woman than it is on the man. So get over it!" We got the pattern Lorie wanted.

How do we make decisions in our daily lives, and how do we discover what God wants us to do? What college should I attend? Whom should I marry? What job should I take? And what's the right and ethical decision in this situation?

Making decisions is a part of daily life, and they can be difficult to make, especially when other people are involved. This morning we continue in our study of the book of Acts, and today's passage takes us to a situation where the early church had to make a decision that was far more important than selecting a stoneware pattern. It had to do with the nature of the Gospel itself, and it would affect the future of Christianity forever.

I. The Issue at Hand.

By the time this meeting was convened in Jerusalem, Gentiles had been joining the church for about 10 years. The movement began with Cornelius, the God-fearing centurion, who, along with his friends and family, was baptized by Peter in Caesarea (Acts 10:44-48). Next came the large number of people in Syrian Antioch who believed when unnamed missionaries shared the gospel with Greeks who lived there (11:20). Barnabas was sent to check out what was happening there, and he recruited Paul to help disciple these new believers. The church in Antioch then sent out Paul and Barnabas to share the gospel in predominantly Gentile territories, and they returned with the news that "*God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles*" (14:27). What had begun as a trickle of Gentiles coming to faith was fast becoming a torrent!

Most Jewish believers didn't have any problem with Gentiles coming to faith because many OT passages predicted their inclusion. However, they began to question just exactly how God intended to incorporate these Gentile believers into the early church. It was one thing for the leaders of the Mother Church in Jerusalem to give their approval to the acceptance of Gentiles in general, but would they also approve of their conversion without the additional requirement of circumcision. Would they support faith in Jesus without adherence to the Jewish Law and traditions, or commitment to the Messiah without conformity to Judaism.

The problem came to a head when a group of people from Judea arrived in Antioch and started teaching that circumcision was absolutely essential for a person to be saved. Paul and Barnabas



couldn't have disagreed more. The debate became so intense that it was decided that a delegation, including Paul, Barnabas, and a number of other people, would go to Jerusalem and discuss the matter with the apostles and elders of the church there.

There have always been people who have wanted to make the gospel a "Jesus *plus*" kind of equation. You can be saved if you accept Jesus *plus* circumcision. You can be saved if you accept Jesus *plus* live a good life and give up all your bad habits, or you fill in the blank. What is your litmus test for true discipleship? You can be saved if you accept Jesus *plus* something else.

Pastor and author Earl Palmer, who spoke at our Laity Lodge retreat a couple of years ago, says that whenever we attach an additional requirement to the equation of faith and try and make it Jesus *plus* something else, it really becomes Jesus *minus*. The additional variable negates the work of Christ, and it cancels out the sacrifice of our Lord. The good news of the gospel is that there is nothing we can do that will add to the salvation God has already accomplished for us in Christ. You don't have to be circumcised, or be a Presbyterian, or pray a certain prayer, or memorize a creed, or give money to the church to be saved. Salvation is complete and finished in Jesus Christ and His atoning death on the cross. It's Jesus *plus* nothing else.

II. The Debate In Jerusalem.

In verses 5-18 of our passage we read of the debate that took place. In Jerusalem some Pharisees who were Christians insisted that circumcision and observance of the OT Law were essential for salvation. So, the passage tells us, "*the apostles and elders met to consider this question*" (15:6), and speeches were made by Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James. In good Presbyterian fashion, they convened the Session, they discussed the matter, and they took a vote!

The James who is mentioned here wasn't the James the brother of John who was one of Jesus' disciples. You'll recall that James was killed just a few chapters earlier in Acts by order of Herod, and he was martyred for his faith. This James was the half-brother of Jesus to whom the Lord appeared after the resurrection, and he became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. (Can you imagine growing up as the brother of Jesus? You mother says to you, "What can't you be like your older brother? He's perfect. Why can't you be like him?" It must have been tough!)

In the debate we see a pattern develop for biblical decision-making in the body of Christ. **Peter** began by reminding the council of the way God brought Cornelius, the Greek centurion, to faith ten years before. Then **Barnabas** and **Paul** told about the miraculous signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through them. It was a report not of their successes but of how God had acted, and its implication was that by His acts and these circumstances God revealed His will.

Finally, **James** was the last to speak. He affirmed what the other three said, and he went on to demonstrate that what they said was in agreement with the words of Scripture in the OT. He quoted Amos 9:11,12, which showed that the inclusion of the Gentiles was not an afterthought of God. Rather, it was foretold by the prophets. Scripture itself confirmed the facts of the missionaries' experience, and there was agreement between what God did through these apostles and what He said through His prophets. This correspondence between Scripture and experience, between the witness of the prophets and the testimony of the apostles, was compelling to James.

Here we see a pattern emerge for discerning the mind of God in making decisions in the body of Christ. First, there is a reminder of God's work in history through their personal *experience*. Second, there is the appeal to *Scripture*, God's revealed Word. Finally, there is the appeal to *reason*. James said that it all made sense. What happened in the Gentile mission was in accord with the Scriptures, in accord with their experience, and in accord with reason. All 3 are means through which God reveals His will to us.



I think it's important to note that during this period of biblical history in which miraculous signs and wonders were taking place on a regular basis, when through prophetic utterances God set apart Paul and Barnabas as missionaries when they were in Antioch, God chose to reveal His will to the council in Jerusalem by means of Scripture, reason and experience. There was no prophetic utterance, and there was no handwriting on the wall to be interpreted supernaturally. It was through Scripture, experience and reason that God revealed His will to the body.

All three of these sources need to be held in balance, and they should serve as a check in the believer's life. We should not use one to the exclusion of the others. All three must be held in tension with the others, and all three must help inform.

III. The Decision Of The Leaders.

James refused to side with the legalists. He listened for the voice of God in the voice of others, and he sensed that Jewish Christianity should not take any stand against an endorsement of the Gentile mission. In doing this, he swept aside the obstacles that had risen, and he left the gospel free to advance even more in the world.

Still, there was a practical question which needed to be dealt with. There were many Christians in Jerusalem who were troubled about the question of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the church, and many believed that tolerance for the scruples of others should be urged. James had a pastor's heart, and his advice was that a letter be written to Gentile Christians, which they did, and we'll cover the contents of that letter next Sunday.

What decision do you face this morning? Does it have to do with business? a personal relationship? a question regarding money? a problem with a co-worker or family member? How will you go about making it? God has given us His Word, His Spirit, our experience, and our sanctified common sense to help us make decisions, and He has given us the body of Christ to guide us as well. Let's use them. It doesn't mean that all the decisions will be easy, but God promises to lead us in the way we should go if we commit our way to Him. And as we see in this text, the best decisions are made in community.

Conclusion.

This passage is really about the priority of grace, and the decision of the leaders of the Mother Church in Jerusalem was *for* grace. The question with which they wrestled, and the question each of us needs to ask, is this: is our vision big enough for the amazing grace of God? His grace is always busting out of the boxes in which we try to put it, and it will always go against the grain of legalism. But it also has the power to transform our lives and take us into the very heart of God.

During the Reformation, they developed a saying that recovered the biblical doctrine of grace. In the face of the Catholic Church selling indulgencies, Martin Luther and others said, "No! Salvation is by grace alone plus nothing else." The saying they came up with was *Sola Gratia* – Grace Alone! It is the work of Christ's death on the cross plus nothing else that saves you and me.

Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more than He does right now. No amount of spiritual calisthenics and acts of piety, or knowledge gained by diligent study, or crusading on behalf of righteous causes can ever make God love us more than He does right now. You just can't do it. Grace also means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. No amount of racism, or pride, or pornography, or adultery, or divorce, or even murder can cause God to love us less than He does right now. Christ's death covers all the terrible things we've ever done, and grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.



Most of my life, I've struggled to really believe that biblical truth. Maybe you have, too. I know it in my head, but my heart has a hard time really *believing* it and being *embraced* by it. After I became a Christian, I started to try to pay back God for my salvation by living a godly life and doing the things He wanted me to do, climbing the spiritual ladder of success in an effort to please Him, thinking it would make Him love me more. But you know what? You can never do enough good things to balance out the ledger! It's a losing proposition.

Tim Keller says you know you aren't living in grace if either you think God owes you something because of what a good person you've been, or you have self-loathing for the failures in your life and the ways you've messed. Either perspective reveals you think it's up to you rather than standing on the grace of God and the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Last summer I experienced a breakthrough in this area. Lorie and I were visiting with our friends Bill and Rachel Johnson, a wonderful couple that live in Anacortes, WA. Bill retired 10 years ago from his position as a professor of psychology at Whitworth University where he served for over 30 years, and Rachel is a therapist who helps bring healing to people's hearts through counseling. Bill has battled Parkinson's through all of these 10 years, but he never complained. He's one of the wisest and most amazing people I've ever known. They are a wonderful couple who have a ministry of grace that touches the lives of many pastors and missionaries in particular.

One morning as we sat in their breakfast nook overlooking Fidalgo Bay, Bill talked to Lorie and me about grace. He pointed out several passages of Scripture as a way of correcting our misunderstanding and counteract the way we all have a tendency toward legalism. Finally, at the end of a great Bible study on grace, he looked me in the eye and said, "Peter, God is so very pleased with you."

And I began to cry. His words washed over me like a waterfall of refreshment and release, and at least for a moment I was freed from trying so hard to earn God's love and favor, and in that moment I rested in His grace. I want to live into that experience of grace more and more the rest of my life.

Bill passed away in March, and he went on to be with the Lord. The Parkinson's finally took his life. I have lost a hero, but I will always remember him saying to me, "Peter, God is so very pleased with you!" It was a voice from heaven. Maybe it's a voice and a word you need to hear today, too.

