

## WHAT'S A CHRISTIAN SUPPOSED TO DO? ACTS 15:19-35

The title of this message is, "What's a Christian Supposed to Do?" And the answer is...?

If I asked that question of each of you privately there may be as many answers as there are people in this room. Someone might say, "A Christian is supposed to go to church, read the Bible, and pray." Someone else might say, "A Christian is supposed to be holy." Or "A Christian is supposed to love God with all her heart, soul, mind and strength, and love her neighbor as herself." Still another might say, "A Christian is supposed to help the poor and needy." Or "A Christian should be baptized," "tithe," and "take Communion."

Others might answer the question by what they think a Christian is *not* supposed to do. "A Christian is supposed to refrain from doing this, this, and this, and abstain from doing this, that, and that."

When we lived in Kenya nearly thirty years ago it was customary in churches for first-time visitors to be asked to stand and introduce themselves. It was also customary, after stating one's name, for the visitor to say either, "Nime akoka!" (I am saved!), or "Nime akoka kabisa!" (I am saved *completely!*).

When someone merely said, "I am saved," the response of the congregation was muted. Congregants would smile politely, but a few would shake their heads and cluck their tongues, as if to say, "We'll pray for you to get your act together."

But if someone stood and said, "I am saved *completely!*" the congregation would break into applause and shout, "Hallelujah!" Because *nime akoka kabisa* meant, "I don't go to the disco, I don't smoke cigarettes, and I don't drink Tusker, the local beer. Somehow Kenyans equated Christian maturity with abstaining from these particular activities.

And that's the problem. Many of the answers to the question, "What's a Christian supposed to do?" are based on things like how we were raised or what we were taught. Many of those answers are influenced by things like culture, church affiliation, human reasoning, assumptions, and reactions, some of which are subjective and arbitrary.

So, is there a "right" answer to this question?

Incidentally, if a Muslim were asked the question, "What's a Muslim supposed to do?" he/she would respond emphatically and explicitly. A Muslim is supposed to do five things: *Profess that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is his prophet, pray five times daily, give alms to the poor, fast during Ramadhan, and take a pilgrimage to Mecca.* These five "pillars" of Islam not only describe what a Muslim is supposed to do, it actually defines what a Muslim is, according to Islamic scholars. If you do those things, you *are* a Muslim.

So, what defines a *Christian*?

This is a question that created a fair amount of controversy in the first century, especially among Jewish believers who came from a background that was steeped in the Law of Moses. Ever since Peter's vision in chapter 10 and his subsequent visit to Cornelius' house where God opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles, the profile of the church had changed dramatically. Two very distinct groups of people and two very distinct cultures with very different customs had merged to become the Body of Christ. Jewish Christians came from a background where careful observance to the Law of Moses was foundational to their identity, while Gentile Christians came from a background of lawlessness and paganism. Not surprisingly, those differences created friction between the two groups, especially when one group viewed something the other group did as wrong or disturbing.

Tension escalated to the point where a contingent of Jewish Christians (who came

from the sect of Judaism called Pharisaism) began to impose their convictions upon Gentile Christians. They taught that unless Gentiles were circumcised, they could not be saved.

This teaching not only threatened the unity of the church; it threatened the foundational tenant of the Christian Faith—that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus alone. And it compelled the leaders of the church to convene in Jerusalem to settle this matter.

Last week, we looked at the first half of Acts 15 describing this meeting in which the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem Church addressed the question of what is required for salvation. Led by Peter and reinforced by the testimonies of Paul and Barnabas, they asserted that salvation is, indeed, by grace alone, not by works. Forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and eternal life are the result of trusting that Jesus did all the work for us when He died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead.

But after settling this matter about what is required for salvation, the Council continued to deliberate about some issues that were causing tension in churches comprised of Jews and Gentiles. When they finished, James, the biological half-brother of the Lord Jesus and an elder of the Jerusalem church proposed that a letter be written to believing Gentiles (who were not familiar with the Law of Moses) containing a summary of their deliberations.

Look at **verses 19-21**. *<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.*

Some of you might be thinking, “Wait a second! This seems to contradict the issue the Council had just resolved—that salvation is by grace through faith alone. Why would James propose a list of behavioral mandates? And why these particular things, most of which have to do with dietary issues?”

I want to suggest to you that verse 21 is the key to understanding why James listed these particular requirements. James is acknowledging that in every city there were Jews who revered the Law—who read and preached Moses. The Law of Moses contains many regulations about what animals are permissible to eat or not and how to butcher and prepare the meat of those that are. Christian Jews had been indoctrinated in these dietary laws from childhood and still revered and followed them.

But that created a rub in the early church because eating together was an important element of the Christian community (2:46). Churches would gather together at least once a week and participate in what they called “Love Feasts.” Jews brought their shish kabobs and Gentiles brought their pot roasts, and this food was displayed on a common table and suddenly...the Jews weren’t hungry anymore. They’d look at what the Gentiles brought and say, “You expect *us* to eat *that*? And *you* don’t have a problem eating that? After *where* it was purchased? After *how* it was prepared? It’s unclean! It’s not kosher!”

And that much was true. It wasn’t kosher. The meat had not been butchered and prepared according to the specifications outlined in the Mosaic Law. What is more, most meat sold in the marketplace in Greek or Roman cities had come from animals which had been slaughtered at pagan temples. Part of the meat from that animal was then offered as a sacrifice to the idols in the temple, part of it was eaten in temple ceremonies, and part of it was sold to the consumer.

Some of the Jewish Christians who lived in these cities believed that those temple rituals *tainted* the meat so that those who ate it were identifying themselves with that idol or condoning its worship. So, they had strong convictions about eating such meat.

But some of the Gentile Christians were equally emphatic. They said, “Are you

kidding? And miss out on all that good steak? No way! After all, an idol is nothing.”

And the tension created by this disagreement was creating disunity in the church, which is why James proposed these particular mandates. **Verse 22**, <sup>22</sup> *“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...”*

The false teaching promoted by the Pharisees that Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved came to light in the Antioch church, where Paul and Barnabas were serving in leadership. Therefore, it was natural that Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch with this letter. But in order to give weight to the contents of the letter, the Jerusalem church selected a couple of prominent individuals to accompany Paul and Barnabas and thereby form an official delegation.

**Verses 23-27**, <sup>23</sup> *[they were sent] 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. <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup> We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.*

This long introduction, common in the ancient world, sets the stage for the instructions that will follow. First, it identifies the recipients of the letter as “*brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.*” Don’t forget, the Jerusalem Council was solely comprised of Jewish men. By calling these Gentile disciples, “brothers,” they were affirming their equal status as children of God and co-heirs of Christ.

Second, they acknowledged that these Gentile believers had a right to be troubled by the false teaching of the Pharisees who insisted they had to be circumcised in order to be saved. They also wanted them to know that though these Pharisees had come from their church in Jerusalem, they were not representing or speaking for them.

Third, they wanted their Gentile brothers and sisters to know that they took this false teaching very seriously—seriously enough that they would send a delegation of VIPs from the church in order to make things right and settle the matter.

**Verses 28-29**. <sup>28</sup> *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: <sup>29</sup> 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.”*

It is interesting, and perhaps a bit strange from our perspective, that the letter to these Gentile believers does *not* contain a comprehensive summary of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus alone. After all, *that* was the issue that had been raised in the Antioch church and the primary issue that had been addressed and resolved in the Jerusalem Council. There may be a vague allusion to this false teaching in the statement about not burdening them—that is, not requiring them to be circumcised—but no rationale or explanation is given. Instead, the letter lists the requirements that James had proposed in verse 20. What is the significance of these rules? Why *these* particular rules and not others? And should we be following these specific mandates today?

Most of us, I think, understand why there would be a prohibition against sexual immorality. Both the Old and New Testaments declare sex outside of marriage to be sin, and the command to abstain from sexual immorality is a moral absolute, meaning that it is binding

at all times for all cultures.

But what about these dietary matters? I mentioned earlier that in churches comprised of both Jews and Gentiles there was tension at their weekly love feasts over what the Gentile Christians were bringing and consuming, meat that had been purchased at Aphrodite's Butchery; meat that had *not* been butchered or prepared according to the specifications in the Law of Moses.

This tension was creating division in the church—division that was threatening to undermine the credibility of the Gospel and the expansion of the kingdom. So, the purpose of these dietary rules was simply to preserve the unity of the Body of Christ so that the testimony of Christ would not be tarnished, and the work of Christ would not be hindered.

This is a dominant theme in the New Testament. Paul addresses this matter at length in both 1 Corinthians and Romans. And what Paul says in both of those passages is instructive, not only for how we can interpret Acts 15, but also how we can apply the principles to our lives.

Let's look briefly at one of them. 1 Corinthians 8 **verses 1-3**. *Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge" (that is, we all have opinions, some of which are pretty strong). This "knowledge" puffs up (those well-reasoned, skillfully articulated opinions make us proud), but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*

It is significant that regarding the issue of eating food offered to idols, the primary factor that ought to determine what we do or don't do is *love*. Love, not what we know, is the guiding principle that ought to determine our behavior. It's not about who is right and who is wrong; it's not about skillfully articulating a well-reasoned argument for our position on the issue. It is about preserving the unity of the Body, being considerate of those who disagree with us, and, most especially, deferring to those who have stricter or more sensitive consciences than us.

Paul says in **verses 4-6**. *<sup>4</sup> Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." <sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—<sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

The so-called gods of Greek and Roman religions do not actually exist. That's why we call it *mythology*. There are no gods except the one, true God of the Bible. God alone has the power of life, and it's through Him and for Him that we exist.

Therefore, if you eat food that has been sacrificed to an idol it's not going to hurt you, it's not going to contaminate you, it's not going to interfere with your relationship with God. It's just like any other meat because an idol is nothing. Strictly speaking, then, you are free to buy a couple of steaks at the local temple, put them on the Traeger, and enjoy every bite.

However, **verse 7**, *"...not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled."* Some people have been so conditioned to think that an idol is real that to say to them, "It's not real and it won't hurt you," doesn't compute—at least not right away. They may *want* to believe an idol isn't real or dangerous, but their consciences can't process that information and turn it into a conviction—not yet anyway.

If that's the case, for them to eat food that has been sacrificed to an idol defiles their consciences, and therefore, they shouldn't eat it. And Paul says in Romans 14 that someone who defiles their conscience in this way is actually sinning, even though for someone else it



might not be a sin. So those who have weak consciences—overly strict consciences, should not eat food sacrificed to idols. But it's perfectly okay if they don't eat it, because this is not a big deal, one way or the other.

Look at **verses 8-13**. *<sup>8</sup> Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup> But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? <sup>11</sup> And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. <sup>12</sup> Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

Here's the point: Our discretionary choices and behavior, even though they might be thoroughly benign, *can* have a destructive effect on other people. It can cause hurt, offense, or disillusionment. It can even destroy someone's faith (v. 11). In that case, we ought to be willing to forego that legitimate or benign activity, because love always trumps personal choices and freedoms.

And this is the reason the leaders of the Jerusalem church sent the letter mandating some dietary restrictions to Gentile Christians. Yes, salvation is free and cannot be earned by obeying the Law of Moses. Yes, Jesus died to set us free from the law. But those of us who have been set free ought to be willing to sacrifice those freedoms for the sake of someone who doesn't have the same convictions. For the sake of unity, we ought to be willing to lay aside our legitimate rights and freedoms so that our brothers and sisters won't be offended by our behavior.

That's love. Love is being more concerned about our brothers and sisters' well-being than in doing what we *want* to do or what we are *free* to do. Love is being willing to defer, to surrender, to sacrifice, for the sake of another.

So, to answer the questions I posed earlier regarding the specific dietary requirements in Acts 15: What is the significance of these dietary rules? Jews and Gentiles in the first century church had very different dietary convictions and preferences stemming from their religious and cultural backgrounds.

Why these particular rules and not others? Because when Jews and Gentiles ate together at their weekly Love Feasts, these different dietary convictions created tension and threatened their unity. And this could easily escalate into division, which would tarnish the testimony of Christ and hinder the work of Christ. So, the church leaders in Jerusalem offered a relatively easy solution to the Gentile believers: When you are in the presence of your Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ, refrain from eating these animal products that are offensive to them.

Finally, should we be following these specific mandates today? Not necessarily the mandates (though it depends on who you are with) but certainly the principle of love. Have any of you ever been served or exposed to meat that has been sacrificed to an idol? This is not a major issue in our culture, so most of us don't have to be concerned about this. If you lived in India where food is routinely offered to Hindu gods in Hindu temples, it might be relevant. If you were having a meal with a group of Messianic Jews, it might be relevant. We should always be aware of our audience.

Though moral absolutes like abstaining from sexual immorality are always binding, specific behavioral mandates that apply to certain cultures vary from one culture to the next. If you invited some believers to your home who were formerly Muslims, it's a good idea not to serve pork. Not because it's a sin to eat pork, but because it may be offensive to a person

whose conscience was shaped in a Muslim culture.

Furthermore, we need to be careful about imposing our convictions that are shaped from our culture and background on others for whom those convictions can become a form of legalism (the perception that by obeying certain rules you have more favor with God or you are a better Christian). I told you about the perception of Kenyan Christians in the 90's that a mature believer doesn't smoke, drink beer, or go to the disco. Where do you think they learned that? It was from the missionaries that came from America in the forties through the seventies because those were issues in our culture that were perceived to be things Christians did not do. I'm sure those missionaries were well-intentioned, but you can see the danger of imposing cultural behavioral mandates.

So, what's a Christian supposed to do? We're supposed to *love*. But love often means adapting our behavior to the people we are with, so that our behavior does not affect them negatively. The letter sent by the leaders of the Jerusalem church had an extremely positive effect on the Gentile believers.

**Verses 30-35.** *<sup>30</sup> So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. <sup>31</sup> And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. <sup>32</sup> And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. <sup>33</sup> And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. <sup>35</sup> But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.*

## What's a Christian Supposed to Do? Acts 15:19-32

Main Idea: An appropriate response to God's grace is to live responsibly and considerately so that others are not offended.

Salvation by Faith Alone (19)

A Responsible and Considerate Faith (20-21)

Three Dietary Concessions

Abstain from "Polluted" Food

Abstain from Eating Blood

Abstain from eating meat of strangled animals

The context of table fellowship

One command: Abstain from immorality

Getting the Word Out (22-35)

The official delegation (22)

The official letter (23-35)

A conciliatory tone (24)

Introducing the delegates (25-27)

Announcing the guidelines (28-29)

The reception in Antioch (30-35)

Gathering the church (30)

Encouraged by the content (31-32)

The church moves forward (33-35)

## **Application and Discussion Questions**

### **Acts 15:19-35**

The dietary concessions addressed to Gentile Christians in the first century were given in order to preserve unity in the church (between Jew and Gentile believers) so that the testimony of Christ would not be tarnished and the work of Christ would not be hindered. What are some contemporary issues or points of disagreement confronting the church in our culture today? How can church members exercise love toward one another regarding those particular issues?

In our differences with other believers, how do you know if the issue about which you disagree (and about which you may feel strongly) is a benign cultural issue or a destructive behavioral or doctrinal issue? How would you deal with a difference that is a benign cultural issue? How would you deal with a difference that is a destructive behavioral or doctrinal issue?