

Guidelines for Fellowship (Acts 15:12-31)^a

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Context

1. **Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Antioch in Syria ending the 1st Missionary Journey**
2. **Soon enough, trouble arrived**
 - A. . . . *certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* (Acts 15:1)
 - B. Believing Jews were attempting to impose circumcision—as well as keeping the law of Moses—as a *condition* for salvation
3. **The heresy of “faith plus . . .”**
 - A. How do we answer the important question of the Philippian jailer “what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30)
 - B. Are we saved by faith alone or faith plus something else—in addition?
4. **Not just an historical issue for Christianity in Paul's day**
 - A. The basis of the Protestant Reformation: *sola fide* - salvation by faith alone!
 - B. This is why we are not sitting in a Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church this morning.
5. **Historically, there have been two primary way in which Christianity is distorted by some who purport to be “Christians” themselves**
 1. Who is Jesus? Was he a great teacher, one among numerous wise man of history? Or is He God incarnate? (Distorted by the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.)
 2. What is the basis of salvation? Is it through faith plus works? Or by faith alone? (Distorted by Roman Catholicism and various branches of Orthodoxy.)
6. **The Jerusalem Counsel provides an official response by the early church to this second question.**
 - A. Peter and James both agreed with Paul - both Gentiles and Jews were saved by grace alone through faith alone.

7. **Beyond the question of the means of salvation, there was an underlying “tension” in the early Church which fueled this issue.**
- A. A large number of Gentiles were being saved, especially as a result of Paul's First Missionary Journey
 - B. As a result, believing Jews began to wonder how the Gentiles were to be integrated into the movement?
 - C. Were they to continue to be viewed as a separate class within a believing Jewish Christianity? As *proselytes* or *god-fearers*, as they had been in Judaism prior to the cross?¹
 - D. What about all the customs and laws of Moses, many of which believing Jews were accustomed to “keeping”?
8. **Today's passage deals with this secondary issue: maintaining unity in fellowship within a growing Church made up of people from vastly different cultural backgrounds and practices.**

Passage (Acts 15:12-31)

[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. [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.²

Clarification by James

1. In our last time together in this passage, we saw Peter make a definitive proclamation concerning the *nature of salvation*:

- A. God made no distinction between the Gentiles and Jews
- B. Their hearts were purified by faith
- C. The Jews will be saved in the same manner as the Gentiles. Just like the Gentiles, the Jew's hearts were purified by faith and not by keeping the law of Moses.

2. In today's passage, we see James in agreement with Peter

- A. We find James's initial point made in Acts [15:14-18](#).
- B. James refers to a passage from the Old Testament prophet: Amos (Amos [9:11-12](#))³
- C. The OT predicted that Gentiles would be “called by [God's] name”
- D. James quotes Amos as if to say, “what we are experiencing is just what God predicted through Amos (among others) would come to pass.”
- E. A couple of minor points to notice in passing

I. *Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name (Acts [15:14](#))*

- a. Refers to what transpired at the house of Cornelius in Acts [10](#).
- b. This is referred to as “a first”, a beginning — this underscores the uniqueness of the establishment and formation of a new spiritual organism: the Church.
- c. The concept of the “body of Christ,” “the church,” is absent from the Old Testament
- d. Born on the Day of Pentecost, primarily Jewish (Acts [2](#))
- e. Soon to incorporate Samaritans (Acts [8](#))
- f. Thereafter to incorporate Gentiles (Acts [10](#))
- g. Evidence that the Church, the body of Christ, did not exist prior to the book of Acts

II. James is *not* saying that Amos [9:11-12](#) is now “fulfilled” — he is merely referring to the passage to establish the fact that the Scriptures predict that Gentiles would

seek the Jewish Messiah in large numbers as they were now experiencing.

3. James then goes one step further: he addresses the misdirected expectation of believing Jews that Gentile believers would undergo circumcision and keep the law of Moses

- A. Don't the Gentiles have to be like us, live like we've had to live, follow the rules we've lived by?

The Jewish/Gentile divide

1. Jewish believers — steeped in OT teachings and practices

- A. Like Paul, Jews could have some confidence in “the flesh”—knowing that, compared to most Gentiles, they were at least attempting to follow guidelines given by God.

I. . . . *If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [of] the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless (Php. 3:4b-6)*

- II. Like Paul, they were living “correctly” as Jews

- a. Circumcised
- b. Observant: attempting to follow the law of Moses
- c. Righteous: to the degree possible, seen as more righteous through their obedience to the law

- B. Monotheistic

- C. Sons of the covenant — having a formal and recognized relationship with God, rooted in God’s covenant with Abraham and especially the covenant given through Moses at Mt. Sinai.

2. Gentile believers — ignorant of the OT, often steeped in paganism

- A. Considered unclean, *called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision (Eph. 2:11)*
- B. Sexual licentiousness
- C. Pagan religious practices involving idols, feasts, and sexual relations
- D. Polytheistic

- E. Lack of a consistent, formal, code of conduct
- F. No relationship with the “God of Israel,” *Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world* (Eph. 2:12)

One New Man

1. **Later, when Paul wrote his letter to the church at Ephesus, he described the relationship which existed between Jews and Gentiles prior to the cross.**
2. **His teaching on the “one new man,” deals with this question of how two radically different groups could achieve unity moving forward?**
3. **Listen to Paul's words to the church at Ephesus**
 - A. *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, [that is], the law of commandments [contained] in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man [from] the two, [thus] making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.* (Eph. 2:14-16)
 - B. Jesus broke down the wall of separation: the law of Moses
 - I. Separating man and God? No: separating Jew and Gentile!
 - C. This separation previously resulted in enmity
 - I. “enmity” is ἔχθρα [*echthra*], “hostility, antagonism”
 - II. Describes the animosity that once existed between Pilate and Herod (Luke 23:12)
 - III. Describes the opposition which the carnal (fleshly) mind exhibits to God (Rom. 8:7)
 - D. Jesus has made both Jewish and Gentile believers “one”
4. **The Gentiles were no doubt complaining, “the Jews have strange customs, they seem to look down their noses at us!”**
5. **Meanwhile, the Jews thought, “the Gentiles are godless, they are without religious or cultural pedigree, and—to make matters worse—some of their practices are highly offensive!”**

James' conclusion — addressing the potential divide

1. ***Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 15:19–21).***
2. **Advice for both sides**
 - A. We [Jews] should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God
 - B. They [the Gentiles] should follow certain rules
3. ***Why: For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 15:21)***
 - A. Because are Jews in every city who live according to principles taught in the law of Moses.

The Rules

1. **James issues some guidelines for Gentile behavior which differ from keeping the law of Moses**
2. **His primary concern (but not his *only* concern): is to facilitate fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers who are as alike as salt and pepper**
3. **Remember the previous enmity/hostility/antagonism/separation between Jews and Gentiles described in Ephesians 2!**
4. **If Gentile believers don't need to be circumcised or keep the law of Moses for salvation, what, if anything, *should* they do to be less offensive to their Jewish brethren?**
5. **Gentiles are to**
 - A. **RULE 1 - abstain from food polluted by (offered in sacrifice to) idols (Acts 15:20, 29)**
 - I. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, *concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one* (1Cor. 8:4)
 - II. All foods are clean, even food offered in sacrifice to idols — so what gives?
 - III. Paul goes on to say, *beware lest this liberty of yours [to eat such meat] become a stumbling block to [brothers] who are weak* (1Cor. 8:9)
 - IV. Paul is discussing curtailing Christian freedoms out of love for another believer who would find a practice troublesome or defile his conscience.

- V. He concludes, *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat [sacrificed to idols], lest I make my brother stumble* (1Cor. 8:13)
- VI. Although Jewish believers could not really be said to be “weaker,” most would never consider sitting down at a meal with Gentiles to eat food offered to idols. They would find it offensive—especially if an unbelieving Jewish relative were present
- VII. Avoiding unnecessary offenses was a hallmark of Paul's teaching on this subject: *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God* (1Cor. 10:31-32)
- a. The Jews - unbelieving Jews
 - b. The Greeks - unbelieving Gentiles
 - c. The church of God - fellow believers, whether Jewish or Gentile
- VIII. This was more than just an issue of Christian maturity—it was an issue of long-standing practice which Jewish brothers were accustomed to and continuing in
- B. RULE 2 - abstain from sexual immorality
- I. As in our present society, fornication was a commonly accepted practice among the Gentiles
 - II. Among Jews, it was understood as Scripture defines it: a serious sin in both Old and New Testaments
 - a. *Marriage [is] honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge* (Heb. 13:4)
 - b. As an aside: notice there are only three sexually active categories—all sexual relations fall into one of the three
 - i. + marriage
 - ii. + fornication (both persons are unmarried)
 - iii. + adultery (one or both persons is married, but not to the other)
 - III. In light of RULE 1, this rule probably had in view orgies associated with the worship of pagan gods by the Gentiles
 - a. Remember the sin of Jezebel in the church at Thyatira?
 - Jesus criticized the church, *Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols* (Rev. 2:20)

- The setting seems to be that of an idolatrous banquet at which sexual licentiousness was the norm.
- 6. RULE 3 - abstain from meat of strangled animals and from blood (treating as three rules, although some would separate them into four)
 - I. Meat from animals which was not butchered in a kosher manner — the blood had not been properly drained from the carcass.
 - II. *And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. . . . Whatever man of the children of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who hunts and catches any animal or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust; for it is the life of all flesh. Its blood sustains its life. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, ‘You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.’ (Leviticus 17:10-14)*
 - III. In recognition of its special, God-given characteristics (life-sustaining, atoning), blood was not to be eaten
 - IV. This prohibition predates the Jew/Gentile distinction, having been given to Noah following The Flood—before there was any such thing as a Jew or the nation of Israel: *Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood (Genesis 9:3-4).*

Not just about fellowship

- A. These rules appear to have been established *primarily* out of concern for minimizing friction between Jewish and Gentile believers
- B. *However*, the rules have ethical and moral dimensions which apply beyond the context of fellowship
 - I. Regarding the eating of blood, I’m not aware of any passage suggesting that the prohibition on eating blood, given after the flood—long before the law of Moses entered as a separating wall between Jew and Gentile—has been rescinded or superseded
 - II. Abstaining from sexual immorality was not just about fellowship, but required as ethical behavior at all times

Against legalism

1. **The “faith plus . . .” crowd are incessant in their efforts to complicate the gospel with additional requirements**
 - A. Some mount a serious threat to the very nature of the gospel: adding requirements to salvation by grace alone through faith alone
 - B. Other threats are less serious, such as legalism: to be acceptable to God you really must do A, B, C, or keep X, Y, and Z.
 - C. There seems to be no end to the creative ideas legalists come up with to load ever greater burdens on the backs of believers

2. **The antidote is found in the refreshing conclusion of the Jerusalem council, as expressed in the letter to the believers at Antioch!**
 - A. *For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things . . . [arriving back at Antioch] when they gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement (Acts 15:28-31).*

3. **A simpler approach: love, empowered by the Spirit working in the life of the believer, guides our behavior rather than a lengthy set of rules**
 - A. *For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God [did] by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).*
 - I. Walking according to the Spirit includes recognizing when our actions could offend fellow believers whose background and experience differs significantly from our own . . . and the willingness to act accordingly

 - B. *Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if [there is] any other commandment, are [all] summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor: therefore love [is] the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10)*
 - I. The walk of the believer, in the midst of a diverse church, as well as within society, is to be characterized by humility and love rather than legalism

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Endnotes:

1. Concerning proselytes, see Ex. 12:19; 20:10; 23:12; Lev. 17:8-9; 18:26; 16:29; 17; 18:6-23; 20:2; 24:16,22; Nu. 15:14; Deu. 16:11,14; Ru. 1:16; Est. 8:17; Eze. 33:24-26; Mat. 23:15; Acts 2:10; 6:5; 8:26-40; 10:1-2; 13:16,26; 15:20,29. Concerning god-fearers, see Acts 9:27; 10:2,22; 13:16,26,43,50; 16:14; 17:4,17; 18:7.
 2. Acts 15:12-31, NKJV
 3. See also: Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Deu. 32:21,43; 2S. 22:50; 1K. 8:43; 2Chr. 6:32; Ezra 7:15; Ps. 18:49; 22:27; 86:9; 117:1; Isa. 9:2; 11:1,10; 42:6; 44:5; 49:6; 56:8; 60:3; 63:16; 65:1; 66:18; Jer. 16:19; Hos. 2:23.
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Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/51_Acts_15_12-31/index.htm.
b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.