

Acts 15:1-35: Will You Submit to God and Show Mercy to Those Who Won't?

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I. Introduction

How do you respond to people who offend you deeply? Do you show them mercy or respond in-kind? Who do you think wants you to let them have it, Satan or Jesus? How we respond to those who hurt us is either fulfilling the Lord's or Satan's wishes. But what if we have the truth on our side, what if our side of the argument is right, is it OK to let them have it then?

II. Acts 15:1-35: In Responding to Those Who Offend You, Will You Follow Satan's or God's Wishes?

15:1-2, imagine you're the apostle Paul. You've been appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself as the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-18). And as the apostle to the Gentiles He Himself sent you on your first missionary journey (Acts 13:2) which took about a year and a half. And the Gospel message you were told to give the Gentiles was given to you directly by Jesus Himself and it had NOTHING to do with getting circumcised or keeping the Mosaic Law (Acts 13:12, 16-41, 48; 14:1, 23, 27; Galatians 1:11-12). Finally, as you went about your journey, you faced tremendous persecution which nearly cost you your life (Acts 14:19). How would you feel if individuals came to your church and started telling everyone that the Gospel you've been spreading is wrong, that unless the Gentiles get circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they cannot be saved? As you can imagine, this infuriated Paul. What would you do? Would you excommunicate the individuals questioning your message and authority as an apostle?

Now imagine you're on the other side of this: you're a Pharisee who's been taught all his life that a relationship with God requires the sign of the covenant (circumcision) and a Law-abiding life. How would you feel if someone ran around telling people otherwise? And this is why Paul and Barnabas respond the way they do; they empathize with these detractors, especially Paul, being a former Pharisee. So, instead of standing on their authority and excommunicating them, they have a long and serious discussion with them. Afterwards the elders of the church of Antioch decide to send Paul, Barnabas, and others to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to settle the matter.

15:3-5, the entire church sends them out, i.e., the church is united in this. On their way up to Jerusalem, they pass through Phoenicia and Samaria—which had predominantly Gentile local churches—and they rejoice at the news of what God had done among the Gentiles through Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. When they arrive in Jerusalem, there was a giant public reception for them by the entire church, including the leadership and Paul and Barnabas again report of the salvation that God brought to the Gentiles. But then something terrible happens: as everyone is celebrating the news of what God has done among the Gentiles, Pharisees who had believed in Jesus Christ stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses."

15:6-11, how will the apostles and elders respond? Will they silence these Pharisees who're going against God's wishes? Will they exert their authority as apostles and kick them out of the church for good? Nope, instead, they stopped the argument before it got out of hand and set a time to discuss this serious matter thoroughly before the entire church—this became known as the Jerusalem Council.

Incredibly, graciously, and wisely the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church allowed the Pharisees to argue their case fully; every one of their objections and arguments was entertained. And after there had been much dispute, Peter, the chief apostle, stood up and made it crystal clear that the Pharisees were wrong and were actually arguing against God: it was God who started the mission to bring the Gentiles into the Kingdom and the messenger He first used to bring them in was not a Gentile proselyte, not even a Hellenized Jew, but a Jew through and through who kept the Mosaic Law religiously: Peter, the apostle to the Jews (Acts 10:1-23; Galatians 2:8). And God who knows what is inside a man's heart gave these unclean, pagan Gentiles His Holy Spirit in the exact same way that He gave it to the Apostles at Pentecost: by faith, He purified/cleansed these Gentiles by faith without any demand to keep the Law. Therefore, to demand that Gentiles keep the Law is not only to put a burden on them that not even Jews were able to bear, but it is to pit yourself against almighty God! And as Peter puts a giant exclamation point on the fact that salvation is by grace through faith alone, he's reaching out to these Pharisees when he says, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ **we** shall be saved in the same manner as they." He didn't say "**they** shall be saved" but "**we**," in essence saying to them, "You know that the Lord saved you by faith; don't forget or undermine the same mercy He showed you."

15:12-21, after Peter's speech, the multitude was in rapt attention as Barnabas and Paul backed Peter up by again recounting the mission God sent them on among the Gentiles. Where God kept putting His stamp of approval on this Gospel message every time He enabled them to perform a miracle among the Gentiles. Then James (not the apostle who'd been killed earlier by Herod Agrippa I, Acts 12:2, but James the Lord's half-brother who'd become the chief elder of the Jerusalem church) speaks up and uses the Old Testament Scriptures to prove unequivocally that Gentile salvation and worship of God was not a new invention but something that God intended all along and indeed was present during the time of king David (he quotes Amos 9:11-12 which states that God would one day restore the tabernacle of David: the significance of this is that it included Gentile worship. In fact, a Philistine named Obed-Edom was not only blessed by God when he temporarily housed the Ark of the Lord, but God made him an adopted member of the tribe of Levi as one of the doorkeepers to His tabernacle, 2 Samuel 6:10-11, 17-19; 1 Chronicles 16:5, 38-40—the name Obed-Edom is rare and means "servant of Edom" thus making it highly unlikely that this is an Israelite but instead the Obed-Edom of 2 Samuel 6:10; Psalm 84:1, 10 [1 Chronicles 9:19]). Therefore, God had this plan of including Gentiles as part of His people long before Paul and Barnabas went out.

James then adds something that seems to contradict what he, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas just said. He says that they should not burden the Gentiles with circumcision or keeping the Law but then lists four things that Gentiles should not do, all of which are part of the Mosaic Law: stay away from things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, things strangled, and blood (Genesis 9:4; Exodus 34:15; Leviticus 17-18). Why does James say these things? It wasn't to undo the salvation by grace apart from the Law that he just stated; it was to ensure peace, unity, and fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers who now made up the Gentile churches. All of these things had to do with Gentile pagan idol worship and would be offensive to their Jewish brethren. Thus, James is ensuring that the Gentiles love their Jewish brethren enough to forgo these practices (three of which were not a sin, as Paul clearly states in 1 Corinthians 8—but notice the focus of Paul's permission to eat meat sacrificed to idols. It was OK for Gentiles to do this, but not at the expense of their Jewish brethren). James closes with a statement that also reaches out to the Pharisee Christians, "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogue every Sabbath," in essence he's saying, "We're not here to destroy the Law of Moses; it will continue to be read and taught in every synagogue every Sabbath."

15:22-29, after this the whole church agreed (Pharisees who still disagreed with this vote, didn't vote for it, but they also didn't vote against it, i.e., God's repeated attempts to reach out to them worked) to send prominent leaders from their church—Judas Barsabas (may be brother to Joseph Barsabas, Acts 1:23) and Silas (Silas his Hebrew name, Silvanus his Roman name, Acts 15:40; 2 Corinthians 1:19) along with a letter indicating their decision on the matter. By using the word "brethren," to address the Gentiles they leave no ambiguity that the Gentiles as full brothers in Christ: they were saved by grace through faith alone, apart from the works of the Law. They mention the Jewish brethren who started this whole thing: they had no authority to tell the Gentiles that they had to get circumcised or keep the Law. And they inform them that they're sending two prominent leaders to authenticate their decision and also state their full support of Paul and Barnabas. At the close of the letter, they state something very interesting: this decision wasn't just made by the church and leadership of Jerusalem; it was made by the Holy Spirit. He was declaring that the Gentiles needn't bother with circumcision or keeping the Law. It was also He who was urging unity between Jewish and Gentile believers by including the admonitions to the Gentiles to abstain from pagan idolatrous practices.

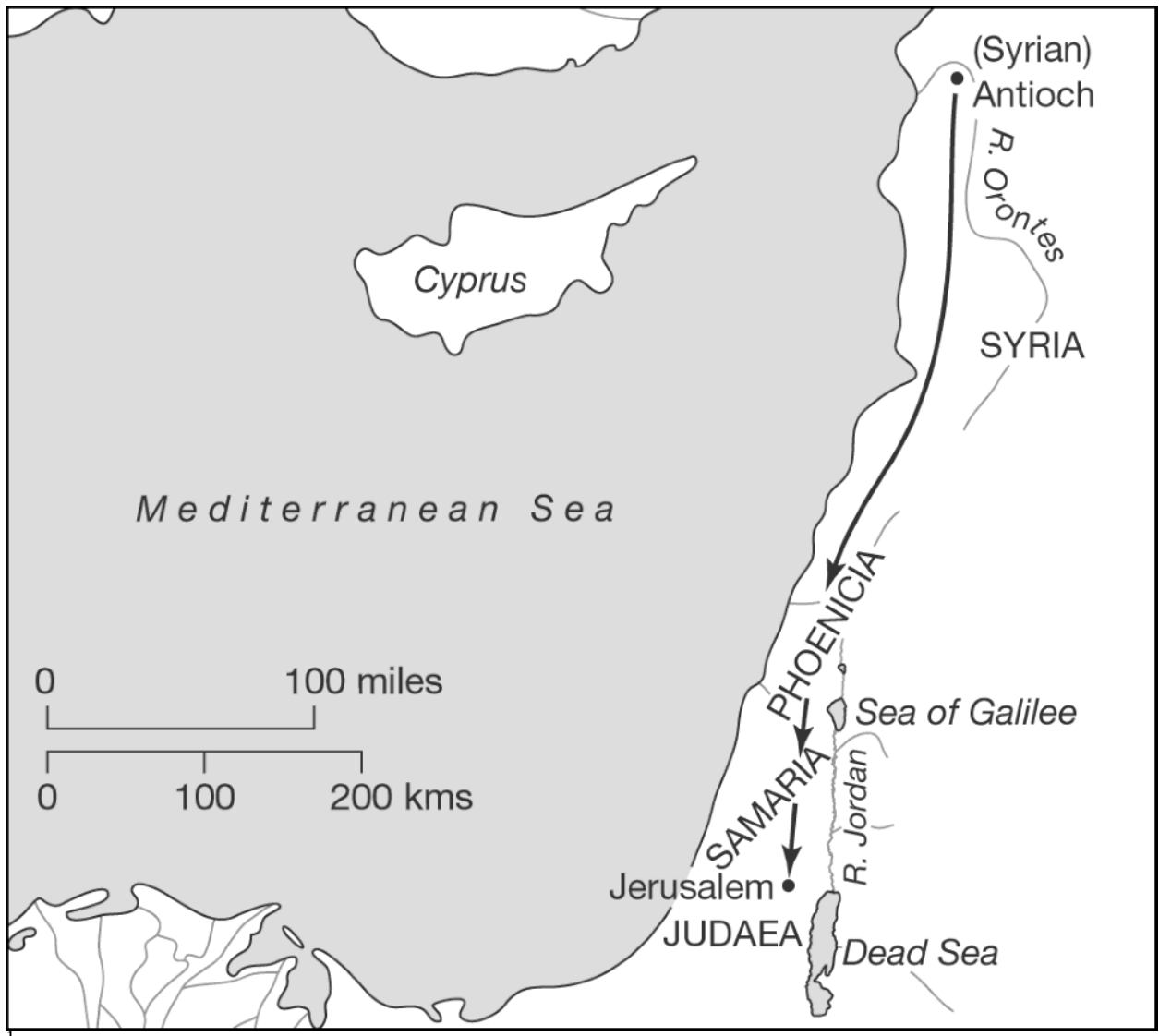
15:30-35, Paul and Barnabas take the letter and head back to Antioch. When they arrive, they gather the entire church and read the letter. They all rejoiced at the encouraging words it contained. Additionally, Judas and Silas, being prophets, exhorted and strengthened the disciples of Antioch with many other words from the Lord. Afterwards, Judas and Silas departed back to Jerusalem with greetings from Antioch (verse 34 is not likely in the original text, since it doesn't appear in the two main manuscript families). Finally, Paul and Barnabas continued their work as before in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.

How will you respond when someone offends you, will you take matters into your own hands or will you listen to God? When someone hurts or offends us our natural reaction is to respond in kind. We should respond with God in mind and not with the enemy who keeps blinding us (2 Corinthians 4:4).

We should consider the opposing side; this will cause us to empathize with them instead of hate them. Paul and Barnabas and the Jerusalem apostles and elders were genuinely offended by the Pharisee Christians who wanted to saddle the Gentiles with the Law. But instead of excommunicating them, they kept reaching out to them. That is, the Lord kept reaching out to them through these men who were willing to walk through that moment with God in mind (Acts 15:28).

It is Satan who wants tension and division; it is God who wants peace, reconciliation and unity. The decision of the apostles and elders was also a compromise, not with the truth: they made it abundantly clear that the Pharisee Christians who wanted the Gentiles to keep the Law were wrong (Acts 15:24, 28). But at the same time, they reached out to them by urging Gentiles everywhere not to offend their Jewish brethren by practicing things that that Law forbade, not because they had to keep the Law, but because it would offend their Jewish brethren who'd grown up all their lives seeing such things as unclean.

This is the way we're supposed to argue, especially when it's an argument about the most serious thing you can imagine. Especially then, it's important that we remember who we are and who dwells in us and calls us to a better response, to mercy, compassion and unity.



III. Conclusion

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." 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. 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.

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (p. 38). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.