“Should Gentiles Follow A Jewish Messiah?”

Galatians 3:1-11

May 14, 2017

Please open your Bible to Acts 15.

Can you remember the last time you had a good “bad” fight? To some degree, we all prefer peaceful surroundings and peaceful relationships. And conflict is almost never pleasant, whether at home, at school or at work. Conflict is just not something we relish. So, we avoid it.

Yet, conflict is a part of life. It’s inevitable. At some time you will have disagreements. And those struggles with people mean conflict. “Bullet holes? cracked windows? I take it this department has had its share of conflict?”

Now, as you know, there is a destructive type of conflict as well as a constructive type. And, not only that, as you are about to discover from Scripture, conflict can even be good.

Acts 15 puts us into the exact middle of the Book of Acts. Acts is the history book of the Early Church. And there’s conflict. Now, I don’t mean conflict in the sense of persecution or trouble from outside; but conflict inside the Church of Christ. But, please watch with me and you’ll see that it’s a time conflict that really settles the Church and, just like Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, God works all things together for good those who love the LORD.

So, please follow with me at Acts 15:1 *“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. (2) When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension [disagreement] and disputation [controversy] with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them,*

*should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. (3) And being brought on their way by the Church, they passed through Phenice [Phoenicia; inside modern Lebanon] and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.*

*(4) And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. (5) But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.*

*(6) And the apostles and elders came together for to consider [of] this matter. (7) And when there had been much disputing [controversy], Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.*

*(8) And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; (9) and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. (10) Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”*

I’ve titled today’s sermon “Should Gentiles Follow a Jewish Messiah?” Shall we pray?

Conflict. It really isn’t the worst thing in a relationship. Conflict brings some things into a much clearer focus. The conflict here is between Believing Jews and Believing Jews about Believing Gentiles. Here we see Christians in controversy.

Can you go back with me mentally to the outset of the Book of Acts? From the beginning, the Gospel went to the Jews; “to the Jew first, and also the Greek…” Most of those who were saved were Jews. Believing Jews were the ones who began the Church.

But, as you know, and as you’d read in Acts, more and more Gentiles were coming to Christ. Here’s what the LORD says in Acts about the Gentiles becoming Christians.

Acts 9:15 *“But the Lord said unto him, go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before* ***the Gentiles****, and kings, and the children of Israel…”*

Acts 10:45 *“And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on* ***the Gentiles*** *also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.”*

Acts 11:1 *“And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that* ***the Gentiles*** *had also received the word of God.”*

Acts 11:18 *“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, then hath God also to* ***the Gentiles*** *granted repentance unto life.”*

Do you know who the Gentiles are? The word “Gentile” is the word “nation.” Anyone who is not a Jew, in Scripture, is a Gentile; from the nations outside of Israel.

And the great and glorious God of Israel so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever [Jew or Gentile] believeth on Him should not perish, but hath everlasting life.

Every day of your life you and I should be extremely grateful that Jesus entered the human race so that anyone, Jew or Gentile, could be saved.

Now look again with me at Acts 15 and verse three. Acts 15:3*“And being brought on their way by the Church, they passed through Phenice [Phoenicia; inside modern Lebanon] and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.”*

What had Paul and Barnabas been doing since the Church at Antioch sent them forth? They’d been going into the Gentile world and presenting Christ to them. And now more and more Gentiles were coming to the LORD. Yet, the Church was still, mostly a Jewish Church.

But, who is that speaks us about these Gentile Believers in the Jewish Messiah. A sizable number of the Jews who had gotten saved were Pharisees.

And who were the Pharisees? Pharisees are mentioned 97 times in the NT. The word means “separated.” The Pharisees were a division of the Jewish community that stressed heritage, blood, rules, laws of purity, ritualism, fasting, tithing. They called themselves a “kingdom of priests.” Of the three Jewish sects, they were the most quote “loved.” The Pharisees taught the common people. The Pharisees read the Law of Moses. The Pharisees saw them-selves as the true keepers of the Law. And the Pharisees were often at odds with Jesus during His earthly years.

And yet, here we find Believing Pharisees. Look with me at Acts 15:5*“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.”*

So, can you see the conflict? These Jewish, now Christian, teachers were of the belied that the Church was just an extension of Judaism. So, the thinking was this. “Shouldn’t the Gentiles who are now following the Jewish Messiah; shouldn’t they be required to follow the laws of Moses? By the way, folks, a Jewish Rabbi, Rabbi Simlai, in the third century, preached a sermon in which he stated that there were 613 rules the Jews were to follow.

Other Rabbis since Rabbi Simlai have said that there were 365 positive commands in the Law of Moses and 248 negative ones, all which are the be adhered to; 365 was said to correspond to the number of days in a year and 248 to the number of bones in the human body. They were close. At birth we have nearly 300 bones and some of those, as we grow, fuse together so we now have 207.

But the conflict of Acts 15 is not over bones. It’s a serious disagreement. The Believing Pharisees were saying that the Gentile Christians should practice circumcision and keep the Laws of Moses.

Acts 15:5*“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.”*

Can you see a problem with this teaching? Do you think, for example, that the Gentiles should eat only what the Jews ate? Or should the Gentiles practice ceremonial cleansing? Would the Gentile men ever agree to Jewish circumcision? Didn’t, the Gentiles, at one time, before coming to Christ, worship many gods? And do you think the Gentile Christians wanted to become Jewish?

Now, some of you might be thinking, what does all this have to do with me today?

Folks, the answer is this. The truth is what sets us free. The truth is what the Early Church needed if it was to survive and grow and thrive and succeed. The truth is what makes Christianity the only true religion in the world.

Let me show you how the Apostle Peter solved this conflict for the Early Church and for us today. Look with me at verse seven. Acts 15:7*“And when there had been much disputing [controversy], Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.*

*(8) And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; (9) and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. (10) Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”*

First, God made the choice to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Acts 15:7 *“…Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.”*

It wasn’t Peter’s idea that the Good News should be given to the Gentiles. It’s was God’s. Do you remember Peter’s vision of the sheet descending from heaven with all sorts of animals on it and God’s command that Peter eat them? Peter, good Jew that he was (and he certainly would have made a good Pharisee); but he was a fisherman by trade.

Pharisees copied the Laws of Moses. Pharisees taught the people. Pharisees were the educated ones. Fishermen, on the other hand, were the unlearned and ignorant; at least that’s what the typical Pharisee would have said.

And God had spoken to the fisherman, Peter, and told him not to call unclean what He now called clean. Peter got his information directly from the mouth of the LORD.

So, first, God made the choice to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Second, God knows every heart. Acts 15:8*“And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;…”*

Folks, if there’s one truth that makes everyone us equal with everyone else on the planet, it’s this. God knows your heart. And what really matters when it comes to relationships here on earth as well as our relationship with God, it’s this. Relationships are a matter of the heart.

And the Pharisees have this in common with lots of people today. They look on the exterior. They see what you do. They know you by what you do. On the other hand, the LORD sees you as much more than what you do. He sees your heart. He knows your heart. Proverbs 17:3 *“The fining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold: but* ***the Lord trieth the hearts****.”*

Jeremiah 17:1 *“I, the LORD,* ***search the heart****…”*

I Thessalonians 2:4 *“But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which* ***trieth our hearts****.”*

There is something very powerful in this simple word from Peter. Folks, God sees and knows and searches and tries the heart. You may be the smartest person in the room. But God observes you from what He sees in your heart.

You see, your heart is the real you. Your motives matter a lot to God.

First, God made the choice to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Second, God knows every heart.

Now these two things are very important. But there’s something in what Peter says that day that is equally important.

Third, God purifies the heart.

Acts 15:8 *“And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; (9) and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.*

If there’s one thing we don’t have by nature or by practice, it’s a pure heart. And, if there’s one thing that God wants you and I to have, it’s a pure heart.

And here’s where this matter of conflict created a huge benefit for the Early Church. The conflict clarified the message of those Early Believers.

You see, the LORD makes no distinction between people based upon our heritage or our religion. There’s no difference between the Jew and the Gentile when it comes to the real person. He knows we’re all the same on the inside. And folks, God’s goal for people is that we experience a pure heart.

There’s no other way to have a relationship with the LORD. You need to have your heart purified. Anything else is man-made religion and a totally incorrect path the God. Above everything is the heart. And above everything in the heart is purity in your heart. You have no saving relationship with the LORD if you don’t have a purified heart.

And what specifically does Peter say to the people that day about the heart? That it is the LORD who purifies the heart.

The one thing we all lack is the one thing only the Gospel can fix. At salvation an impure heart gives way to a pure heart. God does a work inside you that nothing you could ever do could accomplish.

How many are there who try to purify themselves in order to get God to accept them? How many are there who make promise after promise to themselves or to God that they’ll be better or that they’ll try harder?

Yet, the glory of the Gospel is the Simplicity of Christ. God’s Gospel is sent into the impure hearts. And why? Because the only way to get your heart pure before God is by the work of God in that heart.

Why do you think the ordinary Pharisee of the LORD’s day so opposed Jesus? It was because what He said convicted their hearts. And every man knows that his heart is impure. No one is born or grows up and into a pure heart. The Pharisees of then and the religionists and intelligentsia of today rebel against anything and everything that Jesus stands for. Why? Simply put; He’s right and they are wrong.

Folks, our hearts are wrong. We are on the wrong road if we are living apart from Christ. You need a pure heart if you are ever going to see the LORD.

And yes, a Christian is the live daily by purifying his heart. But you can’t have the fruit if you don’t have the root. The root is that God, in the Gospel, makes a way for an impure heart. And, folks, it’s His doing; not yours.

If you have never seen the truth that your heart is impure, then you have no inkling within you that you need the Gospel of Christ. You are living in a self-effort world. You try and cannot achieve. Why? Because first, you need to see what a wonder it is that God so loved the impure hearts that He gave His perfectly pure-hearted Son that whosoever believes in Him has everlasting life and will not perish.

Do you see with me what’s really taking place when the Gospel is received by someone? Can you see that the Gospel is the only way of salvation? Can you see that the whole purpose of Chris going to Calvary was so that your impure heart could be washed into purity? Can you see how powerful the Gospel really is? God is able to convert an impure heart into a pure one. That’s the effect of the Gospel.

First, God made the choice to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Second, God knows every heart.

Third, God purifies the heart.

Fourth, God purifies the heart by faith.

The conflict of the Early Church was not merely that the Gentiles were being told by the Believing Pharisees that they’d have to abide in the Laws of Moses. The really conflict was the matter of merit versus faith.

The only way the heart can possibly become clean in the LORD’s eyes is if we believe the Gospel. Something happens in the heart when we reach out to Him in faith.

Yes, faith goes against the grain. It goes against your natural tendency to want to gain salvation by merit.

But, if that were, in any way, the truth, then why even have a Cross? Why even have God’s Son enter humanity? We might have well have all become Jews and that would have done it. But it didn’t.

You see, what happens when we move from faith to salvation by merit? We make salvation a yoke of bondage; verse ten.

Acts 15:10*“Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”*

If the Jews couldn’t bear up under the burden of the Law, how in the world can the Christian? These Believing Pharisees were supposed to be the thinkers of the day. They were supposed to be the ones who held the golden key to God’s Heaven. Yet, here they are, Christian Pharisees, telling Christian Gentiles they had to promote circumcision and the keeping of the laws of Moses.

Folks, it’s a yoke of bondage to think that salvation now means ceremonies and special days and special months and feasts and creeds and ordinances of man and taste not, touch not rules and regulations.

Yes, we need rules. But rules; even laws are to be obeyed because we’ve got pure hearts and now we can love the Law-giver and honor Him as we obey His commands.

Now, there are some of you here today who think that being a Christian comes like this. Faith plus good works or faith plus baptism or faith plus obedience. Or faith plus Jewish holidays. Or faith plus Saturday worship. Folks, simply and instantaneously God converts an impure heart into a pure heart. You can’t add to God’s work by baptism or good works or anything else. You could never keep all the rules. Yes, you could try. But the only result would be guilt and condemnation.

How many times have you heard someone say “I was baptized when I was a baby”? Or, “I was baptized when I was an adult, and when I came up out of that water, I was saved”? Why? Because they believe that it was faith plus baptism or faith plus good works or faith plus being religious. And faith plus anything leads to confusion and no true salvation.

No wonder Peter had to face this conflict head on. He had to quote straighten out those false teachers, though they were Christians.

Folks, it’s not by works of righteousness that we have done.

Titus 3:5 *“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost…”*

All your efforts and good deeds only make you nice lady or a gentleman. They will never make you a Christian. Why? Because you are saved only by the One Who extends mercy to you; by the One Who washes you with Regeneration and Who renews you by sending His Spirit to live within you.

So you see, it was supremely good that the Church had conflict in those days. It was God working everything together for good through that conflict. Without it, we’d still be under a “yoke of bondage.” We’d be preaching “become a Jew.” Instead, the truth has made us free. In Christ we have had the one thing happen to us that still to this moment should both shock and humble us; that our hearts have ben purified by God through simple child-like faith. Can there be any other valid salvation anywhere on the face of the earth?

You see, it’s an obedience of faith that gets you into His Kingdom. No amount of Jewishness or merit or religion or any other thing than the faith in the finished work of the Son of God Who died in your place.

So, what will it be? Will you surrender to the truth of simple faith in the work of Someone Else? Or will you stay on the same path you’ve been on for years and years?

What will bring you to pray this prayer with me today? *“LORD, I admit to You and I am a sinner and deserving of the justice of Hell. I repent. I change my mind today. I believe that Jesus is enough for my Eternal Security. I pray this in Jesus’ name.”*