

Acts 15

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[0 : 00] Good evening and welcome to St Silas. If you're visiting for the very first time this evening, a very big warm and welcome to you. My name is James, I'm on the staff team here, and I'll be giving us a steer through this passage tonight. A big thank you to Rob for leading and Aileen for reading for us earlier. Let me pray for us as we start. So Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the great gift that it is to us. We thank you for Acts 15, Lord. We recognize that in life, as we saw last week, we have to go through many struggles and strifes to enter the kingdom of God. Please help us to endure those struggles and those conflicts joyfully. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, a couple of years ago, the church that I was working at went through a great conflict. And conflicts are never great, are they? Most of us like to avoid them, if we're honest, don't we? And I remember sending a text to a friend at the time, and it was something like this. Look, this thing is coming up. I think it's going to be a big deal. It might last quite long. I thought I better let you know about it. And I got the reply back saying, praying for you, please stay calm, kind, and wise. And that's great advice for someone if they're going through a conflict, isn't it? It's a great prayer to be praying for someone. And six years on, seven years on, the church is still going through that controversy. And that conflict hasn't resolved itself. Well, there's still a couple of bits going on. But the truth is that life is filled with conflict and controversy, both inside the church and out with the church. The conflict also gives us great gifts.

So here's one of my favorites, duct tape, invented by the Americans in World War II to stick ammunition boxes together. I don't know where I'd be in life without duct tape. It's a great gift that a terrible conflict has given us. And then if you've been to St. Silas before, you'd notice the Nicene Creed just behind us. And that's a statement of faith written by early Christians when they were going through a great conflict, a great dispute over who Jesus is. And often conflict works to help us reassess our values in life, what we are about and what is it we're doing. So in Acts 15, we have this controversy that threatens to divide the church. And out of this comes God's vision of what he wants his church to look like and what true worship of God is going to look like. And so our points for this evening is we're firstly going to consider the conflict. We're going to consider the conflict that threatens to divide God's church. And then we're going to look at what true worship looks like under three headings. So true worship means being accepted by God out of grace. True worship means being a part of God's united family. And then finally, true worship means coming to God in joyful repentance. Just by way of caveats, often Acts 15 is used to disregard God's word. But we can't use it like that because in Acts 15, we see the apostles and elders coming under God's word. And then secondly, Acts 15 is really the climax of the book of Acts. And in the book of Acts, Luke has been making the arguments that the big thing that

God is doing in the world is saving people from every tribe, tongue and nation. And he's bringing them in under one banner, as one people under the Lord Jesus, as his word has gone out. And so our first point there, a conflict that threatens to divide God's church, verses one to five. And the controversy is caused by Judean believers. And the believers, that's the area surrounding Jerusalem, who come up north to Antioch in northern Syria on the coast. And they start teaching, unless you're circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you can't be saved. And what they're saying is a Jesus is not enough.

You need to keep the laws of Moses if you want to be saved. It's Jesus plus the customs of Moses equals salvation. You see, it's not enough that Jesus came as the Son of God. It's not enough that Jesus died for you on the cross as the Son of God. If you want to be really right with God, then what you need to do is you need to top that up a bit. You need to be doing stuff. You need to be adding on works. It is a bit of law. It never goes amiss. And it's a false teaching that causes a great conflict in the church. So in verse two, we read that Paul and Barnabas come into sharp dispute with these teachers. And so they send Paul and Barnabas down to Jerusalem, where these teachers have come from, to the church in Jerusalem, who has planted them. And that's the mother church where Christianity started. And it's not the first time that we've seen the church in Antioch sending Paul and Barnabas out. So Acts 10 to 15 really covers a 10 to 15 year period, where we see Paul and Barnabas faithfully teaching in the Antioch church. So we remember 11 verse 28, and then right at the end of our section, 15 verse 35, and we see them being sent out on various missions from the Antioch church.

In many ways, it's a model church for us. It's a loving church. So we see how they were sent out, Paul and Barnabas were sent out to care for Christians in Jerusalem who are suffering under a great famine in 11 verse 30. And then we see that they're a proclaiming church. They send Paul and Barnabas out to proclaim God's word to the nations at the start of chapter 13. And here we see them as the defending church as they send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to know and defend what the true gospel is. And the question behind the controversy is, what is true worship of God? Is it just Jesus?

[6 : 47] Can I come to God simply by trusting and believe in the Lord Jesus? Or do I need Jesus plus the things that I do, plus works, plus the laws of Moses? And so true worship means being accepted by God, by his grace, verses 6 to 11. And so after much discussion, Paul and Barnabas are sitting in Jerusalem discussing this over with the apostles and elders, the big chief, Peter, stands up and he addresses this council of church leaders in Jerusalem. And the background of the speech that he gives there is the Roman centurion Cornelius' conversion that Peter had spoken to the council about earlier in Acts 10 and 11. I'll just read what Peter said to them then. So pick it up in verse 15 from Acts 11.

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them, that's the Gentiles, as he had come on us at the beginning. And we remember Acts 2. And then I remember what the Lord had said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So if God gave them the same gift that he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?

And when they heard this, that is the apostles and elders sitting in Jerusalem, they had no further objections to Peter preaching to the Gentiles. And they praised God, saying, so then, even to the Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. And so in Acts 15, Peter's argument goes like this. He says, the council have already agreed that God has included the Gentiles in his plans.

And we see this in verse 7 there. 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 the belief. And to quote exactly what the council had said previously, so then, even to the Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. And the implication here is that if they say that the Gentiles must effectively become Jewish to be saved, if they need to add on works of the law to their faith in Jesus to be right with God, then that goes against what they have said earlier. They're changing the gospel. And then Peter goes on to say, but what we have seen is that God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us.

God has accepted them. So pick up in verse 8, God who knows the heart showed that he accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. And Peter says, God has accepted them, and so we should accept them.

[10:03] But notice here, he goes further than that. He says, God knows the heart, verse 8. So if you think that you're any better than them, that you're one up on them, God knows your heart. He knows if you've been naughty or nice. And then he goes on to say that God purifies the heart by faith. So irrespective of what you've done, despite the fact that God knows your heart, he chooses to purify it, not because of anything you have done, but simply as you trust and believe in the Lord Jesus. And the coming of the Spirit on the Gentile believers shows that God has cleaned and purified their hearts. And he has made them acceptable to them, not because of anything they have done, but out of his mercy and out of his grace, as they have believed in the Lord Jesus. And then notice that Peter goes on to rebuke them for being hypocritical on putting on the yoke of the law on the Gentiles in verse 10.

And I wonder if your experience is anything like my experience. Sometimes when I'm picking my friends, I place an expectation on them that I don't really meet myself. And I'm being completely hypocritical there, aren't I? And that's something that I should really repent of. And what we see is that God has accepted the Gentiles. He's accepted even the awkward ones. And he has shown this by giving them his Spirit. They're all precious in his sight, and they should be cherished. And then finally, Peter concludes his argument, it is by the grace of Jesus that we have saved. So look at verse 11.

It's incredibly strong, isn't it? No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. Growing up, I went to quite a high church, and I thought the way that you're right with God is by the stuff that you do, by being a good server on Sunday, by doing the right stuff at school, by being a good goody two-shoes. And then when I came to the West End of Glasgow, I noticed that the West End of Glasgow is exceedingly religious as well. The way that you write with God on the West End of Glasgow is by doing stuff. It's just that, A, our gods look slightly different, that we do stuff for, and the stuff that we do look slightly different. So I might have to only eat specific things. I need to be more organically conscious. I need to be at one with nature in lots of ways. And trying to live like that, trying to live in a way where I am right with God by doing stuff becomes a great burden. It becomes a great struggle. It becomes a great yoke that is incredibly hard to bear. But Jesus says, stop doing stuff. Come as you are. All are welcome, and I will make you right. I will purify you. I will give you rest and peace. If you want to be free from your anxiety, if you want to be free from your stress, if you want to know that you're accepted and loved, then simply come as you are to me. My burden is easy, and my yoke is light. Well, then immediately

Peter steps down, and Paul and Barnabas stand up, and they tell of all the things that they have done among the Gentiles in verse 12. So I'll just read verse 12. The whole assembly became silent.

As they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. And we've seen all of those signs and wonders in our last couple of evenings here at St. Silas, haven't we? How they healed the man born who was lame from birth.

[14:08] And we think about their sufferings, and we think about all their preaching of the gospel boldly, and how hundreds and thousands of people have come to believe and trust in the Lord Jesus, even the most unexpected of people. And what Luke does here is he uses this very peculiar phrase, signs and wonders. And it's the very last time that he uses it in the book of Acts. And we remember how he had used it to describe how Jesus was accredited as the Son of God by signs and wonders. And then remember how he uses it to accredit Paul as Jesus' spokesperson by doing signs and wonders. And here he shows that the Gentiles are accepted because Paul does signs and wonders. Where? Among the Gentiles.

And so just as God has rescued his people out of Egypt all those years ago by great signs and wonders, and we remember all the signs that Moses did, so God has rescued the Gentiles and brought them in to be a part of his people here. Now, and the third point that we see in this passage is that true worship means being a part of God's united people, verses 13 to 21. And once Peter and Paul and Barnabas have sat down, James, the brother of Jesus, stands up and he says, picking up in verse 14, Peter, Simon, has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

By Simon there, he's referring to Peter, just to be clear. And then he says God is making a people for himself from the Gentiles. But just notice there the language that he uses. He says God intervened.

That is, God had visited his people. So just as God had visited Abraham, and just as God had visited Moses, so God has visited Peter and others to show them what he is doing in the world, and that he is accepting the Gentiles into his plan, into his people, to bring them into faith. And then notice there, he goes on to use the phrase, he chose a people. And so just as God had chose Jacob, and just as God had chosen the Israelites to be his special people, not because of anything they had done, but simply out of his mercy and kindness. So now God is choosing people out of all the tribes and tongues and nations of the earth to be his special people, to be his chosen people. And then James goes on to say that this isn't something new, but that this is something that God has promised to do from of old. And he quotes from the book of Amos there, where God says that God will, that he'll restore his people after judging them. But when he restores them, they will look completely different, in that they'll no longer come from simply one ethnic people, that is the Jews, but his people come from all people, all tribes, tongues, and nations. So look at verse 17, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the

Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago. And that is, even the Gentiles, people from all over the globe, will become God's people, his special people, and they'll bear his name. So kosi sikilele, Africa, that Zulu, for God bless Africa. And the Zulus, there are people from the Zulus who know and trust and love the Lord Jesus. And then yiswe milabongwe, Jesus, hold my hand. And that's the song that they sing in Vanuatu, where they praise and love the Lord Jesus. And then if the Afrikaans, Jesus, ek het joelief, Jesus, I love you. And all people from all over who consider the Lord Jesus their Lord and Saviour, and who bear his name. And I can't do a good Scotsman, but I imagine that you guys at home could do some good Scots and Northern Irish accents of how you praise the Lord Jesus' name. And what God is doing is he's making a diverse people into one church, and that's the big thing that he's doing in the world. And so, by implication, when we look down on church, when we draw back from church, when we look down on the people at church and think they're not quite our sort, what we're really doing is we're looking down on God's work in the world, and we're saying that we're above it. And we're looking down on God's people. You see, a lot of us may think about church as kind of the mint after dinner. It's an optional extra, which you can have if you want to or not, depending on how you feel. Take it or leave it. It's a nice bonus. But what Luke says here is that church and being a part of God's people is really the bread and butter of life. It's the thing that you have been saved for. You have been saved to be a part of God's people and to bear Jesus' name.

[19 : 44] And the fourth point that we see in this passage is that true worship means joyful repentance, verse 22 to the end there. So, having agreed with what Peter said and confirmed from the Old Testament, James then goes on to make a recommendation about what true worship looks like in practice.

And so, we pick up there in verse 19 and verse 22 in our passage, our section here. It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by adults, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

What James is doing there is he is not cherry-picking the law, picking out laws that they need to keep, especially to know that they're right with God, stuff that they should eat or stuff that they shouldn't eat. It's not an issue of what's on the menu, but it's an issue of the venue that they're in, whose temple are they worshiping in? Have they turned to the Lord in repentance and trust? You see, food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood were all things that were associated with pagan worship and pagan temple worship at that time. And turning from those was a test of an allegiance. It was the minimum test that showed that your allegiance was now with the Lord, and that you had turned to him in trust, and that you were doing things in keeping with repentance. And so this list here isn't really a burden. And we see that in verse 31, and that when the Gentiles received this letter received this list, they were glad for its encouraging message.

Why? Because they'd already been doing all of this. Luke's told us this. They were already turning to the Lord in repentance and trust. They've already turned away from the pagan temples and from idol worship, and they were already trusting the Lord Jesus, and they were doing deeds in keeping with repentance. But it does prompt the question for us, is what are the idols that we need to turn away from?

What are the tests that we need to apply to our own heart to see where our allegiance really lies? It might be how we think about independence. We might be tempted to think that we can be a Christian who's independent of God's people, that we can be a lone ranger Christian. We can be in isolation, and that being a part of God's people is an optional extra. It might be that we attempted to look down on others at church. We might think they're not really our sort. They might dress a bit funny.

[22 : 58] I don't want to hang out with the skaters, or that person wears that shirt or brand. I don't want to hang out with them. They're not my kind of people. And so what we're saying, if you really want to be right with God, then you need Jesus, but you need this little optional extra as well. It might be that a relationship might be the big idol in our life. It might be a relationship that is drawing us away from the Lord. Then we should be working towards a relationship that is going to encourage us into God's people and into praising and loving the Lord Jesus. It might be money. We might have started a good job. Life might be looking very good for us, and the temptation of chasing the dream, of chasing the career ladder, might be very real for us. There's always one little sweetie extra on the rung that we want to get to that might be drawing us away from church. And so we stop going to Wednesday fellowship, and we stop praying with our friends as much as we should. And we stop, we may be cutting out our quiet times. It might be pornography or something like that. And that's the thing that has captured our enthusiasm and our hearts. It might be entertainment and relaxation and holidays. It's been a brilliant time in Glasgow for, not really a brilliant time actually, because lots of my neighbours have bought the most astoundingly big TVs. You see normally in

Glasgow you'd see old mattresses lying around, and now it's just TV boxes everywhere. I never knew that they made a 65-inch TV until my neighbour got one. And it's clear that's the thing where their allegiance lies with comfort and relaxation. But then notice also that this repentance is a joyful repentance. I think this was the thing that really struck me in this passage, and that really challenged me as I looked at this passage. You see, Acts 15 is a passage that's filled with conflict. It starts off with a sharp dispute in verse 2, and it ends with a really bad argument in verse 39. It's not the kind of thing that you would expect in a people who are on fire for Jesus. But at the same time, Acts 15 is also the climax of Luke's argument of what God is doing in the world, of how he is uniting people together under the Lord Jesus in one people. And so it's a chapter that's all about unity.

But how do you balance those? How do you bring those together? How do you bring together living with integrity, standing on the truth, but at the same time being strong on unity, being united with others, holding on to that? And so a lot of us might say that we need to hold what we believe loosely, that doctrine divides, that what we believe splits unity, that holding on to stuff, holding on to the word as God's word, it kills unity. We need to relax on that a bit. But this chapter says that we can only have unity if we stand on the truth, if we defend the gospel.

And how that works, how we balance those, I think is the great surprise in this chapter. And it's the real little nugget that Luke's put in this chapter for us. And I wonder if you spotted it. You see, this chapter at the same time is a chapter that's filled with joy and encouragement. Let me show you.

Verse 3, Paul and Silas, they're on the way to this great controversy, on the way to this great debate, and they start sharing the gospel. And the news made all the believers very glad. They tell of all that God has been doing. And the believers are glad on the way to this conflict. And then verse 31, the Gentiles, they receive the judgment, and they read it. And how do they respond? They were glad and encouraged by its message. And then verse 32, Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, they said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. They build them up. It's joyful.

[27 : 30] And then finally, the very last verse of the chapter, Paul went through Sire and Cilicia. That's on his second missionary journey. And what's he doing? He's strengthening the churches. He's bringing them good news. He's filling them, their hearts, with joy. But that shouldn't have really surprised me. You see, at the heart of the Christian message is a Savior who joyfully faced conflict and controversy for me and for you.

You see, Jesus faced up to conflict and controversy in his day. He faced up to the Romans and the Jewish authorities, and they crucified him for it. Why did they crucify him? They crucified him because he said, you can't be right with God by the things that you do. You can only be right with God by trusting in him by trusting that he is who he claimed to be, the Son of God. And then they crucified him because he taught that all people can come to him. Jew, Gentile, no matter where you're from, you can come to him.

Come as you are. Even the most sinful, even the most wicked of us could come to Jesus so long as we turn to him in repentance and trust. And remember how the religious leaders of his day looked down on him.

Why? Because he ate with sinners. They weren't prepared to accept people who were sinful, who weren't keeping the law. But Jesus says, all are welcome so long as you show faith and trust and believe.

And Jesus faced all this conflict and he went to the conflict of the cross joyfully. See, this, listen to how the author of the Hebrews puts it, but for the joy set before him, he endured the cross.

[29 : 27] You see, Jesus loved his church so much, even the ones that we might struggle to love on Sundays, that he gave them his spirit as a sign of his acceptance. He brought them into his family. He gave them his presence. Jesus loved his church so much that he went through the agonies of the cross. And because he knew it was for them, for you and for me, he went through it joyfully. It was a great joy to him to be able to go through those struggles, Father, because he knew that something better was coming. And so as we go through our struggles in life, as we struggle to maybe get on with everyone at church as much as we like, or maybe we're struggling with coronavirus at the moment, and we struggle with lots of things. And I know that lots of us listening tonight will have some really big struggles. And my heart and my prayers really go out for you. But won't you endure these light and momentary struggles as one of God's people, joyfully, accepting that Jesus has given up all things for you joyfully, to have you as one of his people and be with him in heaven as we head on that heavenly journey. Let me close in prayer for us as we close. So Father, we thank you that through great struggles and strifes we enter the kingdom of God. Please help us to be united as one family.

Please help us to stand on the truth. Please help us to be joyful at all times. In Jesus' name. Amen.