
Acts 15

*Verses 28-35: The Letter -- Four Necessary Things -- Ministry at Antioch
Ministry Reading*

Opening Reading -- Acts 15:28-35

Acts 15:28-35

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them. And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles. Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still. Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others also.

It Seemed Good to the Holy Ghost, and to Us

Verse 28 is a remarkable statement: 'It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us.' The letter bears apostolic authority -- verse 23 shows it was written by the apostles and the elder brethren together. When Rome claims the authority to convene councils whose decrees bind all Christians, and when such councils take

the language of Acts 15 for themselves, the claim cannot be sustained. The authority of Acts 15 rested upon the presence of apostles -- and we do not live in an apostolic age. No modern synod can say with any legitimacy: it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, and then lay down authoritative decrees. The apostles are coupled with the Holy Ghost in verse 28, and they are no longer here.

These were what are called the apostolic decrees, and they carry the weight of that title precisely because apostles stood behind them. The Darby translation of verse 22 uses 'let go' rather than 'dismissed,' which removes the flavor of a formal synod exercising authority over delegates. They were let go -- as in Acts 13, where the assembly at Antioch laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and let them go. The language of authority is there, but it is the authority of the Holy Spirit acting through apostles, not the authority of ecclesiastical machinery.

Four Necessary Things: The Common Thread

The four things laid upon the Gentile believers as necessary are: abstaining from meats offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from fornication. They are called necessary things -- not suggestions, not preferences. The word burden is used deliberately: the Lord said in Matthew 11 that His yoke is easy and His burden is light, and this is a burden of that character -- real, genuine, but not heavy. It is bound upon us.

The common thread running through all four of these things is that each one sets aside the authority of God in some manner. Idolatry substitutes another god for the true God. The wrongful use of blood disregards the fact that life belongs to God. Things strangled retain the blood and therefore involve the same disregard for the sacred character of life. Fornication violates what God established from the beginning in creation -- one man and one woman joined as one flesh, as the Lord Himself cited from Genesis in Matthew 19. Each of the four is a different

form of the same root sin: setting aside the authority of God.

Meats Offered to Idols: The Incompatibility of Idolatry

The prohibition of meats offered to idols may seem to refer primarily to the literal idolatry that was everywhere present in the Roman world of the first century -- the temples, the feasts, the communal meals attached to idol worship as Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 8. But 1 John 5:21 broadens the principle: 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.' The definition of idolatry goes further than sticks and stones and silver images. Anything that takes the place of God in the heart -- that claims for itself the devotion and submission that belongs to Him -- is in principle idolatry. The man who flatly refuses any sense of obligation to the things that seemed good to the Holy Ghost is setting up himself in the place of God. He is, in the deepest sense, an idolater.

Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 10 is conclusive: 'Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of demons.' There is a moral impossibility involved. Those who persist in idolatry cannot be maintained at the Lord's table. The assembly must acknowledge that. And Revelation 2:20 shows the gravity of allowing a teaching spirit that leads the Lord's servants into eating things sacrificed to idols -- the assembly at Thyatira was indicted precisely for tolerating this.

Blood and Things Strangled: Life Belongs to God

The prohibition of blood rests upon a deep principle: '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' (Leviticus 17:11). Life belongs to God. He has given the blood on the altar -- it is His to give and His to require. A thing strangled retains the blood rather than allowing it to be shed, and so it falls under the same prohibition.

If life belongs to God, then God's authority in the matter of life must be owned. Where He has prescribed that a murderer's life is to be forfeited, that prescription stands -- it is not ours to set aside. The instinct of Western societies to abolish capital punishment, however much it may be dressed in humanitarian language, implicitly violates this principle: it is men setting aside what God has established about the sacredness of life. Similarly, the disregard for unborn life in the matter of abortion is an assault on the same principle. Life belongs to God, and the disposition of it belongs to Him, not to human convenience.

Fornication: What God Established from the Beginning

The sin of fornication is the direct opposite of what the Lord described in Matthew 19 as God's creation ordinance -- one man and one woman joined as one flesh. It violates and destroys what God established at the beginning. In a world where these four things -- idolatry, blood, things strangled, and fornication -- are not merely permitted but are among the primary attractions with which the world and the advertising industry market themselves, the call to abstain from them is a call to be practically heavenly people, not worldly ones. These are not peripheral matters. They are the things that 'make the world work' in the eyes of fallen men.

You Shall Do Well: The Positive Side

The end of the apostolic decree is equally instructive: 'From which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well.' The call is not merely negative -- avoid these things and that is the sum of Christian life. It is the minimum, not the maximum. These are a floor. A Christian is saved to please God, to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, to make progress in the Christian life so that the spirit becomes more heavenly. The four necessary things keep the Christian free from the things that characterize the world and that set aside God's authority --

and on that foundation, well-doing and growth in grace become possible.

They Rejoiced for the Consolation: Barnabas, Son of Consolation

When the letter was read in the assembly at Antioch, they rejoiced for the consolation. They were glad not to be put under the law of Moses, and the things that were laid upon them as necessary did not dampen their enthusiasm or spoil their joy. There is something here worth noticing: if the letter had instead said that they were not under the law for justification but were under it as a rule of life for sanctification -- the doctrine often associated with Reformed theology -- one wonders how much consolation that would have brought. What they received was freedom from the law altogether, with the four necessary things laid upon them instead. And they rejoiced.

One of the men who carried this letter to Antioch was Barnabas. And Acts 4:36 tells us that the name Barnabas means Son of Consolation. The man called the Son of Consolation carried a letter full of consolation to brethren who needed consolation. Whatever significance one may attach to that, it is a beautiful connection.

Prophetic Gift and the Testimony of Judas and Silas

Judas and Silas, we are told, were prophets. They came from Jerusalem as witnesses and spokesmen for what had been decided there, accompanying the signed letter. Not only was there a written document -- there were two living voices to confirm it. They exhorted the brethren with much discourse and strengthened them. That is true prophetic ministry: not prediction primarily, but the speaking of God's mind in a way that builds up and confirms.

There is a distinction worth drawing here between office and gift. Eldership is a local office: elders are ordained in every city, and an elder visiting another

assembly is not automatically an elder there. But a prophetic gift is not an office tied to one locality. Judas and Silas had that gift wherever they went. The gift goes with the man; the office stays with the place.

Peace After No Small Dissension

The chapter began, in verse 2, with 'no small dissension and disputation.' It ends, in verse 33, with the brethren being let go in peace. Peace had been attained -- but not by compromise. Reading the letter, there is nothing politically astute about it. There is no acknowledgment of the merits of the opposing position, no smoothing of ruffled feathers, no admiration expressed for the Pharisaic traditions of those who had been pressing for circumcision. It was not politically crafted. It was faithful. And the result was peace.

Peace attained by compromise is not real peace. Peace attained by confusion -- by raising the noise level until no one can think clearly -- is not real peace either. What was stated in the apostolic decrees was very simple, very clear, and easy to understand. In submission and obedience to what seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to the apostles, there was peace. That is the pattern.

Plurality of Ministry at Antioch

Verse 35 provides another witness to something already established earlier in Acts: the plurality of public ministry at Antioch. 'Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others also.' Paul and Barnabas had just come through a major controversy -- and they had been on the right side of it. One might have expected them to consolidate their position, to take charge of the public ministry and crowd out others. That is entirely contrary to what we read. The ministry was with many others also. There was liberty for the Holy Spirit to use whatever vessels He had prepared.

Darby's translation renders the end of verse 35 in a word order that is striking: 'announcing the glad tidings, with many others also, of the word of the Lord.' An unusual arrangement in English, but perhaps not without meaning: those who ministered the word at Antioch were nestled in between the glad tidings on one side and the word of the Lord on the other. Surrounded by the gospel on one hand and the Scriptures on the other. That is the place for a minister of the word.

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Lord willing.