

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church  
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LET'S NOT HINDER THE GOSPEL

Acts 15:1-21

July 11, 2021

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There are three points to today's sermon:

- The church argued over circumcision for the Gentiles.
- Jewish Christians wanted Gentiles to behave like Jews.
- The apostles and elders settled the matter.

**THE CHURCH ARGUED OVER CIRCUMCISION FOR THE GENTILES**

**SCRIPTURE:** Acts 15:1-2

*Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.*

**EXPLANATION:** Do you remember how hard it was for the Jewish Christians to accept that Christ's plan of salvation was also for the Gentiles? It turns out, they still did not have it all figured out. These teachers made their way into a church composed of mostly Gentile believers and began adding to the gospel. Specifically, they told the male Gentiles that they must be circumcised in order to be saved.

Circumcision was not exclusive to the Jewish people. Other cultures practiced circumcision, probably because of the hygienic benefits. However, for the Jewish people, circumcision was much more significant. It was a symbol of the covenant between Israel and the Lord and a sign of one's devotion to God. Therefore, people who were uncircumcised, like the Philistines, were not only considered unclean in body but also unclean in their hearts and lives. For this reason, Jewish servants,

foreigners living in a Jewish household, and anyone who wished to convert to Judaism also had to be circumcised.

To the Jewish Christians, salvation was a series of steps. They believed that a Gentile had to first become a Jew before they could become a Christian. Of course, they were wrong.

**ILLUSTRATION:** It's been a long time since most of you clocked in for work. Many companies today use a phone app for clocking in and out of work. A woman forgot to clock in, worked her day, and then when she was ready to clock out, she realized she'd forgotten to clock in earlier in the day. This turned into a visit to HR and twenty minutes later the matter was solved.

There are certain things in this world that are unnecessarily hard. In fact, there are some things that are easy but that people or processes make difficult. When was the last time you did something that was supposed to be simple, yet was complex?

In this case, the Jewish Christians were trying to make salvation harder than what it really was. So, the church argued over circumcision for the Gentiles because...

## **JEWISH CHRISTIANS WANTED GENTILES TO BEHAVE LIKE JEWS**

**SCRIPTURE:** Acts 15:3-6

*The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. <sup>5</sup> Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses." <sup>6</sup> The apostles and elders met to consider this question.*

**EXPLANATION:** Paul and Barnabas argued against this new teaching, but there was still much confusion. The Church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to figure it out.

The Jewish believers wanted the Gentile men to not only be circumcised but to follow the law. Because of Paul's background, he understood their concerns.

There are 613 Jewish commandments in the Old Testament. These were known as the laws of Moses or the Torah. God gave these commands to Israel for their own good and to help them live in a manner that separated them from other people groups. Then extra rules were created by people in order to help them keep from breaking the laws. I promise to talk more about that at another time because it is so interesting.

**ILLUSTRATION:** A family had three girls, one of which was very small. The form of discipline in the family was spanking. Two of the sisters felt sorry for the little one and pleaded with their mother not to spank her. But when it was time for the bigger girls to be spanked, the little one would say, "Spank 'em harder, mamma!"

Some people believe that if they have to suffer, everyone else ought to as well. That seemed to be the case with these Jewish Christians. These believers did not yet understand the freedom they had in Christ. While the laws served as a moral code of living, it would never offer a way of salvation. In fact, the primary purpose of the law was to help the Israelites realize their need for a Savior. Following so many rules was impossible, and these Jewish Christians knew that. Yet, they were trying to place the burden of the law on the Gentiles.

The Church argued over circumcision for the Gentiles because Jewish Christians wanted Gentiles to behave like Jews.

## **THE APOSTLES AND ELDERS SETTLED THE MATTER**

**SCRIPTURE:** Acts 15:7-21

*After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "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 believe. <sup>8</sup> God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now then,*

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*why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”*

*<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. <sup>15</sup> The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: <sup>16</sup> “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’<sup>18</sup> things known from long ago. <sup>19</sup> “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup> Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”*

**EXPLANATION:** Peter reminded the Jewish believers of how burdensome the law had been for them. He called it a “yoke.”

The Greek word for yoke is zugos (dzoo-gos'). Literally, it means a wooden collar that is fastened over the necks of two animals so that they are joined and can work together. The word “yoke” is also used metaphorically to mean burden or bondage. Peter called the law a yoke; it was a burden around the necks of the Israelites. In comparison, Jesus encouraged people to be yoked with him. By uniting ourselves with Christ, we can be assured that he will do the heavy lifting. His yoke, he said, is easy and light.

The religious leaders understood that there was no need for the Gentiles to be circumcised or to follow the Mosaic law. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas testified how God was already at work among the Gentile congregations. James and the other elders agreed. So, the matter was decided. As a means of tying up loose ends and possibly as a compromise, James proposed three rules that the church recommended

Gentile converts obey. These rules were given to Gentiles for their own betterment but not offered as an addition to or a requirement of salvation.

- The Church argued over circumcision for the Gentiles.
- Jewish Christians wanted Gentiles to behave like Jews.
- The apostles and elders settled the matter.

**APPLICATION:** By trying to impose circumcision and laws as a condition for salvation, these believers were making it harder for people to come to Jesus. They were hindering the gospel. Of course, today the church never does this sort of thing. Or do we? These early believers thought, “To become a Christian they must become like us.”

- Have you ever expected a person to look a certain way when they enter the church doors?
- Have you ever thought that someone should act a certain way before they come to Christ?
- Have you ever believed that someone was past the point of redemption?
- Have you ever thought that a certain people group was not worthy of hearing the gospel message?

By our lifestyles, our words, and our attitudes, we sometimes make it hard for people to come to Christ. Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross. Let's not hinder the gospel.

Let's not hinder the Gospel!

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