

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

#### Acts 21:17-26

Intro: We just saw Leviticus is all about how God can live with sinful people in peace.

- God instituted shadows and signs in the OT
- shadow (sacrificial system), sign covenants (the sign of circumcision)
- All pointing to the truth that he would one day make a way

So where we find ourselves in the story of Acts is Paul is returning to Jerusalem. The last significant thing we have happening in Jerusalem was Acts 15 where there was the council of Jerusalem which had to figure out the following:

God's good news of salvation and forgiveness by means of Jesus Christ's death on the cross is going out to ALL PEOPLE, not just Jews.

-Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism, so there is going to be an amount of overlap with a Jewish person's life and their new life in Christ. So it wasn't necessarily wrong at all for a Jew to be circumcised, but if a Gentile, let's say a Greek, becomes a Christian, does that entail them becoming Jewish? Do they have to be circumcised?

The council decided **no**, a Gentile does not have to follow the Jewish ceremonial laws and rituals to become a Christian.

To be a Christian is not primarily to do something for God-lived a good life, abstained from this or that, or be a good person. To be a Christian is to have heard the incredible announcement that Jesus Christ died for sinners, in their place, rose from the dead and now offers new life by turning away from what ever you've been trusting in and trusting totally in him.

"But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."  
Acts 15:11

Now, James and Paul are reuniting. Paul has been a missionary to the non-Jews and James has risen to a prominent role as an elder among the Jewish Jerusalem.

We'll walk through this story under three headings

**Salvation | What the gospel is**

**Submission | What the gospel produces in us**

**Sentness | All things for all people, all for the sake of the gospel**

**Salvation | What the gospel is**

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed.

**Acts 21:17-20a**

- Paul and James meet together, with all the other elders present
- Paul begins to recount one by one all the things that God has done among the Gentiles.
- And these men who were previously hostile to non-Jews rejoice!
- Then James begins to report how many thousands there are among the Jews who've believed!

The story begins with great rejoicing and praising God!

-Not everything was perfect, but hear what God has done!

Friends, if you don't know the joy of meeting together with a friend and discussing the good things God is doing in your life and the life of those around you, you are missing out!

But why are James and Paul able to rejoice with each other? Because the gospel is going forth! Their greatest love in the universe is shared. A love that crosses racial, ethnic, and income lines!

What is the gospel?

The gospel is the good news that though we have all rebelled against our Creator, Jesus Christ left his eternal throne out of love for you, to die for the sins you have committed, take the wrath of God that you deserve, and he was **successful!**

Paul succinctly captures the gospel in 1 Timothy 1:15

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

**1 Timothy 1:15**

Paul in the book of Titus shares it like this:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

**Titus 3:3-7**

This means: You, throwing yourself, stained and mucked and mired in sin as you are, upon Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross, are justified in an instant, made clean, holy, pure.  
-there is not more sin in you than there is grace in Jesus Christ. Come to him. collapse into the arms of the Savior and you will be clean.

Paul and James have experienced this and so they can't get over it. They rejoice in the saving power of Jesus! All the things GOD HAS DONE

But there is something that must be discussed, James turns, perhaps anxiously to Paul and says, we have a situation...

### **The Situation**

They [the Jews in Jerusalem] are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you.

Acts 21:20b-23a

The Jews have spread rumors about Paul that he said you should forsake Moses, not circumcise your kids, or following Jewish customs.  
Paul never said that. He only said Gentiles don't have to become Jews to become Christians.

And James, with a lot of gall looks at Paul and says, "Do therefore what we tell you."  
Now, this rubs us Americans, particularly, the wrong way.  
-Do what I tell you.

Now how Paul responds to this situation is going to tell us everything about what he believes and how the gospel affects his life.

### **What the gospel produces in us (Submission)**

Paul has been freed from obligation to keep the customs of the Jewish by Christ fulfilling the law on his behalf.

He is under the law of Christ, that is the moral imperatives of the law now show us how to live a life pleasing to God, but he is free to celebrate the Sabbath on a Saturday, Sunday, or Wednesday. The old customs of the law are no longer binding on him.

So what does Paul do, having James say to him, do what we tell you?  
-he submits. Because truly letting the gospel bear down on your life produces humility.

We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

Acts 21:23b-26

-Paul takes part in a purification service

- And he pays for all of them. (great cost to himself!)
- They reconfirm the things Gentiles for sure should do now that they are Christians.

The freedom Christ has provided leads to laying down of our rights

**All things for all people, all for the sake of the gospel. (Sentness)**

This story is essentially 1 Corinthians 9 in narrative form.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

**1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

Because Christ became all things for us, we will submit to the consciences of others in secondary matters, that we may not obscure the Gospel in any way.

What Christ has done for us compels us to use our freedom in Christ only for the glory of God and for the good of our neighbors.

This is what it is to be missional!

We agree that the close hand issue of the gospel is you are justified in the sight of God by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone to the glory of God alone.

So let's see how this play out in Paul's life on a secondary issue and then consider one from our own lives.

Paul's example of using Christian freedom in circumcision

In his ministry, Paul chose to circumcise Timothy, but not Titus (sorry Titus)

Paul refuses to circumcise Titus, even when it was demanded by many in the Jerusalem crowd, not because it didn't matter to them, but because it mattered so much that if he acquiesced, he would have been giving the impression that faith in Jesus is not enough for salvation: one has to become a Jew first, before one can become a Christian. That would jeopardize the exclusive sufficiency of Jesus.

**-D.A. Carson**

Example in our modern day: alcohol

-alcohol is a gift from God, there are many warnings about alcohol in Scripture, turning water to wine was Jesus' first miracle...you free to drink and free to abstain from drinking.

To create a contemporary analogy: If I'm called to preach the gospel among a lot of people who are cultural teetotalers, I'll give up alcohol for the sake of the gospel. But if they start saying, "You cannot be a Christian and drink alcohol," I'll reply, "Pass the port" or "I'll think I'll have a glass of Beaujolais with my meal." Paul is flexible and therefore prepared to circumcise Timothy when the exclusive sufficiency of Christ is not at stake and when a little cultural accommodation will advance the gospel; he is rigidly

inflexible and therefore refuses to circumcise Titus when people are saying that Gentiles must be circumcised and become Jews to accept the Jewish Messiah.  
-D.A. Carson, The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World, p. 145.

So we have been given Christian liberty for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor!

This is the two greatest commandments playing out missionary

1. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength
2. Love your neighbor as yourself

We will do nothing to obscure the sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection for salvation. We will willingly lay down every right we have if it might give us some cultural favor to advance the gospel.

Way too often in the forms of Christianity we encounter, people abuse Christian liberty -some imagine God is be more pleased with them because they don't drink and if all the fake Christians would stop drinking, then we could get somewhere.

"Woe is me" because others are "Christians" AND drink.

-others flaunt their freedom and say "woe is me" if I can't have glass of wine with my dinner or a beer at the end of the week.

The logic of the Bible is this: "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel."

### **Application**

How can I use my freedom in Christ to best serve my cultural Christian neighbors and my pagan neighbors? Woe is me, not if others don't follow my extra-biblical moral code nor woe is me if I can't exercise my freedom however I want, but if I set up any roadblock to the gospel, or question in any way the sufficiency of Christ.

So with worship songs and styles

-there are many worship songs that aren't my favorites  
-but I want my heart to be so informed by the gospel that I say I will belt out whatever song it is that glorifies Christ! I want to sing it at the top of my lungs. Short of the Psalms, no song is theologically perfect. Style can change. I must sing to my God.

With media

-There are shows with amazing stories that harm my own mind and cause me to sin with nudity and horrific content. I'm free in Christ right? I'll gladly give that up. Being able to be TV show relevant for your non-believing neighbors is the most overrated missional strategy of all time.

How we date

-You may be able to go on a camping trip with your boyfriend or girlfriend and not sexually sin with each other. The Proverbs say, "Can a man scoop hot coals onto his lap and not be burned?" So I am deeply suspicious, but that's beside the point  
-What will a nonbeliever assume about your relationship? Are your actions beyond reproach?

How we use money

Paul says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything, only faith working through love." Galatians 5:6

There are people, for whom Christ has died, who have not yet heard the gospel. Some of them at 7500 miles away in an unreached peoples group, some of them are next door neighbors, and some of them are sitting in this church.

Christ was rich, but became poor for you.  
Christ was all-powerful, but to sympathize with you became weak  
Christ never had to experience thirst, hunger, or pain but chose to do so for you.  
The author of all life willingly gave up his life for you

So we, the redeemed of Christ must say, Christ gave everything up for me. I'm now free. I will use every ounce of strength, every fiber of freedom, every dollar I earn, every breath that I have to become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

“So whether you eat or drink, do all things to the glory of God!”