

## Scripture for June 20, 2021

### Acts 15 1-2, 4-21 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>5 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. <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. <sup>7</sup>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, 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>1</sup>

<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.”

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 9:10-11 (LXX)

## Sermon: A Gift of Grace

Missionaries often have good stories to tell. Being a missionary kid myself, I also have a few of my own, like when my dad and I hiked into the remote Ngosi hills near Limankara, on the Nigeria-Cameroon border in the early 1970s. It was there that I experienced people who were stunned because they had never seen a white person before. And, of course, there are stories of wild animals of various kinds: hippos, hyenas, leopards, baboons, snakes, etc. But much more than that, missionaries and those who work today on inter-faith dialogue are often at the cutting-edge of their faith. Their encounters with others challenge their sense of orthodoxy and ethics. It takes great wisdom, patience, and indeed soul searching to hear and respect the other and yet have a meaningful and productive conversation. In the process, the missionary's own theology can be changed, and their more conservative sending churches may not understand. This was also the experience of Peter and Paul in separate missionary stories that Luke retells in the book of Acts. The outcome was conflict within the church. And both apostles were recalled to explain their behaviour to Head Office in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> In the process, church policy was changed.<sup>3</sup> This seems relevant for the church in any age, and it is timely to reflect on this matter given the recent major decisions made by the Presbyterian Church in Canada at General Assembly concerning full LGBTQI inclusion. So let's briefly explore Acts 15 together.

Paul and Barnabas were based in (Syrian) Antioch, about 500 km north of Jerusalem, where there was a thriving church. From that city, Paul and Barnabas were sent on a mission trip to Cyprus and then on to southern (modern-day) Turkey. You can read about their adventures in Acts 13-14. The outcome was that many non-Jews became Christians and small churches were established in the places they visited. Earlier, Luke tells us of Peter's astonishing encounter with Roman centurion called Cornelius at Caesarea; you can read about that too in Acts 10. You will remember that Cornelius has a Pentecost-type<sup>4</sup> of experience of the Holy Spirit, which Peter and his colleagues could not deny, and so he baptized Cornelius and his household. Peter then had to explain his actions to the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem. Not only had Peter baptized non-Jews, but he had entered their home and shared their food and hospitality.<sup>5</sup> We think nothing of this today, but this was a *huge* cultural taboo for Jews at that time. Peter explains his actions in the context of a weird vision and of the Holy Spirit being shockingly at work in Cornelius' life. Peter concludes: "If then God gave them the same gift (of speaking in tongues<sup>6</sup>) that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"<sup>7</sup> The response was stunned silence as they processed what that implied. Then they praised God because they finally understood that God's grace extended to non-Jews too.<sup>8</sup> You might think that this dramatic story would have changed church policy once and for all; apparently not. (We can be so slow to learn. . .)

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<sup>2</sup> See Acts 11:1-18, 15:1-35.

<sup>3</sup> Thankfully so; we are here today and have 'liberal' practices because of these conflicts and conversations.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 2. (Because of the similarities in those experiences, Peter could not deny God was at work – even though it shocked him and challenged his theology.)

<sup>5</sup> Acts 11:2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 10:46.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 11:17.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 11:18. This is evident in the Old Testament, as Paul makes clear in his letters - especially, Galatians and Romans.

Good news travels fast, rumors faster still! News of Paul and Barnabas' mission trip reached Jerusalem and prompted some conservative<sup>9</sup> Jewish Christians to visit Antioch with an agenda. They proclaimed that "unless non-Jewish Christian men were circumcised according to the mosaic law, they *couldn't* be saved;"<sup>10</sup> in other words, they weren't "proper" Christians. These Jews from Judea wanted non-Jewish Christians to formally convert to Judaism, through the act of circumcision, and presumably to also keep the strict dietary laws and follow other Jewish practices. As we heard in our reading, there was a *major* disagreement; Paul and Barnabas *firmly* opposed that very Jewish requirement.<sup>11</sup> Resolving the issue required the equivalent of a General Assembly of the church in Jerusalem. What would the church leadership do?

They first gathered a *diverse* group of church leaders and had a vigorous debate, listening and *discussing* all sides of the argument. They went through a process of *discernment*, by identifying the true heart of the matter, whether that be theological or ethical. Peter then gave a speech to his Jewish brothers,<sup>12</sup> reminding the Council of his earlier God-ordained encounter with Cornelius. It was there that Peter learned that God has *no favorites* - a point Luke stresses *three* times in the book of Acts.<sup>13</sup> Peter concludes: "Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?"<sup>14</sup> That mention of that yoke implies being bound to the Torah, the law of Moses, and Peter reminds his critics of how burdensome that had become to many ordinary Jews.<sup>15</sup> This brings to my mind the comforting words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take *my yoke on you and learn from me*, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and my load is not hard to carry."<sup>16</sup> That is a powerful message of relief and hope for all who are racked by guilt and a sense of obligation, or who are tired of the word "should," or who see religion as an impossible set of artificial rules. That being the case, we must be very careful as Christians *not* to be pharisaical, placing heavy loads on the weary and abused.<sup>17</sup> For example, I have heard it said that LGBTQI Christians can be part of the church *only* if they remain celibate. Heterosexual Christians are *not* faced with such a requirement, so one can see how ridiculous this sounds in light of those words of Jesus - and Peter. If we understand ourselves to be bound to Jesus, not the Torah, that is sufficient - for in him we find rest, peace, and forgiveness. That is the difference between divine grace and the mosaic law, which Paul discusses at length in his letters.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 15:5 points out that these were Christians from the *Pharisaical* tradition; Paul was from the same tradition, Acts 23:6!

<sup>10</sup> Acts 15:1.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 15:2.

<sup>12</sup> See Acts 15:7-11. Features of this speech sound very much like Paul!

<sup>13</sup> Acts 10:34-35; 11:17; 15:9. I suggest this triple emphasis is Luke being deliberate and so important to his audience. See also Rom 2:11.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 15:10.

<sup>15</sup> Which begs the question: Why now contemplate extending that to non-Jews as a necessary requirement for salvation?

<sup>16</sup> Matt 11:28-30 (NET).

<sup>17</sup> Some well-meaning Christians create a specific litmus test that is supposedly meant to examine the genuineness of someone's faith or belief system and, in the process, miss the whole point of the gospel!

<sup>18</sup> See Acts 15:15 where Peter concludes: "We believe that we [Jews] will be saved through the *grace of the Lord Jesus*, just as they [i.e., non-Jews] will. With reference to Paul, see (for example) Galatians and Romans, and Eph 2. See also [43].

Now James, the brother of Jesus, was apparently now the head of the Jerusalem church,<sup>19</sup> and in addition to listening, he sought wisdom from the Old Testament Scriptures.<sup>20</sup> Curiously, he quotes an obscure text from a minor prophet, Amos,<sup>21</sup> and cleverly adapts it to their present situation and reminds everyone that God's intention was always to include the non-Jews in his family. While their understanding God's past activity was important, the use of Scripture could not – and should not – be the means of denying that God's Spirit was doing a *new* thing before their very eyes. They certainly did not want to hinder *God's* work, even if it challenged all their deeply-held religious traditions. The way Luke tells it, it was James who made the final decision!<sup>22</sup> He did not want to create obstacles that made it difficult for non-Jews to come to God, yet he had some practical, *ethical* concerns because of his desire for *unity* and for table fellowship between Jews and non-Jews.<sup>23</sup> He therefore proclaimed a *compromise* for the sake of *community*. And afterwards, the Jerusalem Council disseminated the decision through authorized representatives, including Silas, and a formal letter.<sup>24</sup> It was prudent to do *both*. Had this wise decision not be made, we might not be here today. The Church could have become a sect of Judaism, and non-Jews may have abandoned its' message in droves. This does not mean the implementation of this decision was easy; we see that later in Acts and in Paul's letters.<sup>25</sup>

I relate this account for several reasons. First, Luke presents this as an example as to how the Holy Spirit works. Both Luke and John relate how the Holy Spirit is the risen Christ's gift *to the whole Church*, and not just to a select few within the church.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the book of Acts reveals that while the Holy Spirit dwells in the church, that is *not* exclusively so because the Spirit is always going *ahead* of the church in *God's mission*, as demonstrated in the Cornelius story and Paul's missionary journeys. The Holy Spirit *surprises* the church. In these examples, the Spirit was pushing the church beyond her conservative boundaries. And the convincing evidence was the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit in someone's life. Now Paul later talks about the gifts<sup>27</sup> and fruit<sup>28</sup> of the Spirit both in a person's life and within a community of faith. I spoke about "Life in the Spirit" a few weeks ago at Pentecost.<sup>29</sup> Paul wasn't anticipating perfection, and his letters reflect the messiness of church life! But he was convinced that

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<sup>19</sup> See also Acts 12:17; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9.

<sup>20</sup> James used *four* things in leading the church to a bold decision for inclusion: Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason – and I think it wise for the Church to do the same today. (Today, the *balance* of those four elements, known as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," vary in the different Christian traditions.)

<sup>21</sup> Amos 9:11-12. Moreover, James uses the Greek LXX OT, not the Hebrew text – a curiosity given this was Jerusalem! One might have thought that quoting Moses would have been a much better appeal to scriptural authority, such as God's call and promise to Abraham - to bless the "*all* peoples of the world" through him (Gen 12:1-3).

<sup>22</sup> Acts 15:19.

<sup>23</sup> See Acts 15:20, 29. If we truly believe in the Holy Spirit, then let him prompt the ethical transformation in a person's life!

<sup>24</sup> See Acts 15:21-35.

<sup>25</sup> See Acts 21:17-26. See also the ethical tensions in many of Paul's letters, for example see Gal 2.

<sup>26</sup> See Acts 2 and John 20:21-23. This is a significant departure from the Old Testament; see Acts 2:17-21.

<sup>27</sup> See 1 Cor 12.

<sup>28</sup> See Gal 5:22-23.

<sup>29</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Life-in-the-Spirit.pdf> .

no one can meaningfully say, “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus is supreme”<sup>30</sup> unless the Holy Spirit is truly present in a person’s life.

The second reason is because the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of truth<sup>31</sup> - has been given to the church, in part to make critical decisions in *every* age. The authority to make decisions does *not* lie in a specific biblical text, but in the *life-giving* Spirit. Yes, we should seek guidance from Scripture, but we also need to recognize the *new things* God’s Spirit is doing today in our midst - amongst the LGBTQI community and many others groups. Jesus shocked his fellow Jews by hanging out with the marginalized and oppressed, those whom devoutly religious people thought were unworthy of God’s attention. For this behavior, he was called the “friend of ‘sinners.’”<sup>32</sup> God’s mission is always to push our safe boundaries; God’s love is more inclusive than many in the church think. Let us therefore beware of being too bound to our own traditions, good though many of them are in themselves, and inhibit the work of God in *our* times. In the letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile churches, James wrote: “For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us *not* to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules,”<sup>33</sup> and he then gives a minimal list that was a *compromise* for the sake of the communal life of the church.

And that brings me to my third point: there are too many Christians who see *compromise* as an evil, preferring instead *rigid principles*. The trouble with this latter view is that churches that split over one principle, soon find that they keep splitting over another matter of “principle,” leaving a weakened and fragmented congregations only known for their dogma.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, I believe that this view, which claims to be founded on principles, is actually based on *fear* – and fear is *not* from God.<sup>35</sup> James was prepared to compromise for the sake of Christian unity.<sup>36</sup> The tensions within the Presbyterian Church in Canada over full LGBTQI inclusion were evident at General Assembly. Strains that may cause some to unilaterally leave the church. On-going friction and unease that will no doubt lead to more overtures to future General Assembly’s that would seek to split the church in one way or another. Some of you may also have strong feelings against the decisions made at General Assembly; if so, let’s talk.<sup>37</sup> My fervent hope is that we can stay together as a national church and as a local congregation. And I want us *all* to continue to strive for unity and graciousness.

In concluding, I wish to redirect us to the Sermon on the Mount<sup>38</sup> where Jesus talks about the ethical life in the kingdom of God, or being “yoked to Jesus” that I mentioned earlier. He begins with the

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor 12:3.

<sup>31</sup> To use John’s language, see John 14:17; 16:13.

<sup>32</sup> Matt 11:19.

<sup>33</sup> See Acts 15:28. See also [20].

<sup>34</sup> In this post-biblical era, consider, for example: the abolition of slavery, the end of apartheid, divorce and remarriage, and the introduction of female ministers, which have all arisen *despite* biblical evidence being used *against* each one. And all had the potential to split churches, and in some cases it did.

<sup>35</sup> See 2 Tim 1:7.

<sup>36</sup> While we might think his compromise no big deal today, nevertheless it was a *HUGE* deal then!

<sup>37</sup> Is this issue so important to you that it eclipses all others? See also Rom 12:18, 21.

<sup>38</sup> See Matt 5-7.

Beatitudes, where Jesus surprisingly redefines “blessedness.”<sup>39</sup> Jesus says that it is the humble and poor who are a part of God’s kingdom, along with those who are persecuted as a direct consequence of following God’s ways. And those with integrity will see God; peacemakers also belong to God. God will exalt the meek and powerless,<sup>40</sup> and those who forgive others will themselves receive grace. Those who mourn and suffer will not be forgotten but will receive God’s strength. And those who are honestly seeking for God, but are hindered or hurt by others (including the church), will be truly satisfied. Everyone who fits into those categories are designated as “blessed” or honored by God. Such people are the vulnerable, those often ignored, unappreciated, and even downtrodden in society. Yet Jesus says God’s kingdom is precisely for “the least of these.”<sup>41</sup>

As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus goes on to talk about the spirit of the law, rather than the letter, but in doing so he *raises* the ethical bar for all of us. We are *all* called to faithfulness - including sexual faithfulness, to character development, self-control, wise discernment, generosity, and to develop positive spiritual practices - including prayer. We are also to restrain from judging others and instead to reconcile and be more self-aware, to genuinely love those with whom we don’t get along, and to be doers and not just hearers of the word. This challenging and uncompromising message is for those who are straight *or* gay, and a sober reminder of *our* continual need for God’s grace and forgiveness, and for the Spirit’s transforming presence in our lives.<sup>42</sup> Amen. Let us pray.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Matt 5:3-12. This makes us reflect on what it means to be “blessed” by God, which in those days was often understood in terms of wealth. Clearly, the beatitudes (and elsewhere in the Gospels) redefines that Old Testament expectation. Remember, Jesus himself *reinterprets* the law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount, with the underlying assumption that he had the (divine) *right* to do so – because throughout Jewish history that is precisely what prophets did! Consider too the ambiguity within just one Gospel. In Matt 5:17, Jesus says: “Do *not* think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have *not* come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Then later in Matthew 12 Jesus says *he* is Lord of the Sabbath and so you *can* break those laws because, as the prophet Hosea put it, “God desires mercy not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6). We have to treat scripture with wisdom, respect, and humility! (See also [43].)

<sup>40</sup> See Matt 23:12; Luke 1:52–53; Prov 3:34; 29:23; Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5.

<sup>41</sup> See Matt 25:31–46, esp. 40.

<sup>42</sup> To belong to God’s kingdom means we are to do the same kinds of things *God* does. We are to love, reconcile, and forgive. And we are to be faithful, persistent, honest, generous, trusting, and discerning—for those are God’s traits.

<sup>43</sup> In my last year at Knox College, we had a course on Pastoral Integration. There we had to bring together our learning in theology, church history, biblical studies, preaching, etc. We were each asked a critical question: “When you distil all that diverse knowledge down, what is the *fundamental* principle that will *define* your ministry?” I think that is also an appropriate question for everyone to consider with regard to the Christian faith. My response was “*grace over law*,” to *err* on the side of *grace* – even when it goes against my personal theology. Enforcing the “*law*,” as it were, is safe. “*Grace*” on the other hand, is risky and prone to criticism, not least in being accused of “*cheapening*” grace – which, of course, is *never* my intention. But, I believe, grace over law not only summarizes Paul’s theology, it encapsulates the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Even Ezekiel’s (overlooked or often forgotten) adaptation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment (cf. Exod 20:4-6; Ezek 18:4, 20, 30) can be regarded as extending divine grace to the mosaic law. It seems to me that “*erring on the side of grace*” is a timely, courageous, humble, and God-honoring approach that is appropriate for every age.

(Incidentally, does God’s oracle through the prophet Ezekiel trump the *Torah* – the word of God revealed to Moses?” The Sadducees in Jesus’ day said “no,” whereas the Pharisees were much more open. We too can be very selective in reading Scripture! We need to be very careful - and responsible - in proclaiming what the “Bible *clearly* teaches” on this or that topic. We can overlook the fact that there is a *trajectory* to God’s revelation to humankind, from the patriarchs through the prophets to Jesus the Messiah and, in these last days, through the ongoing revelations of Holy Spirit to Christ’s church.)