

Walking—Together – Acts 15:12-29

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Unity*

1. During the Fall, if you're outdoors at just the right time, you might see geese heading South for the Winter.
2. There aren't many flyovers in VC but a few dozen flocks do make their annual journey over the area.
3. Years ago I was visiting relatives in Canada & every evening the sky was *filled* with flying V's of geese headed back North.
4. Researchers have discovered geese fly in a V formation for good reason.
 - a. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird immediately following.
 - b. By flying in a V, the flock adds 70% greater range than if each bird flew solo.
5. When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back in the flock and another goose takes point.
7. The geese in back keep honking to encourage those up front to maintain their speed.
8. And when a goose gets sick & falls out of formation, 2 other geese stay with it until he recovers.
9. In geese, God has given a wonderful picture of the kind of unity we need to have as followers of Christ.
10. When we walk together in the unity of the Spirit, we achieve a strength that is far greater than the sum of our parts.

B. *The Early Church*

1. The Early Church understood the importance of unity & worked hard at fulfilling Christ's command to love one another.
2. But their commitment to unity was put to a hard test in Acts 15.
3. How they dealt with it provides some important guidance for us today.

C. *Set the Scene*

1. Today's text follows on what we looked at last Sunday.
2. The church at Antioch was made up of both Gentiles & Jews who were getting along with one another famously.
3. But in about 50 AD, some teachers from Jerusalem who were ultra-zealous for the law of Moses came to Antioch, telling Gentiles believers they had to *become Jews* if they wanted to follow Jesus.
4. Paul & Barnabas, recently returned from a successful missionary journey where they'd seen hundreds of Gentiles won to Christ, disagreed vehemently with these *Judaizers*.
5. When it was clear there was going to be no resolution between the opposing sides, the leaders of Antioch sent Paul & Barnabas to Jerusalem to meet with leaders there & work it out.
6. When they arrived, the debate broke out all over again & kept going without any movement, until Peter spoke up & reminded them of how God had

demonstrated His acceptance of the Gentile Roman centurion Cornelius, through faith in Jesus Christ *alone*, apart from circumcision, keeping Kosher, observing the Sabbath & all the other commandments of the Law.

7. He *challenged* the Judaizers demanding that Gentiles become full-on law-abiding Jews by asking,
“**Why will you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples neither our fathers nor we could bear?**”

8. He reminded them salvation is by grace, a gift received by faith in Christ alone.

9. Righteousness is not something one *builds* by doing good works; it’s a *relationship* granted through faith in Jesus.

10. We considered all this in the message last week. And it brings us to v. 12 –

II. TEXT

A. V. 12

12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

1. When Peter finished the entire group *realized* they’d heard God’s mind on the matter.
2. As Peter spoke he was operating in the *spiritual gift* of the Word of Wisdom & was using his *office* as a Leader who’d shown them God’s way.
3. Seeing the debate was over, Barnabas & Paul then gave a full report on their 1st missionary foray through Cyprus & Asia.
 - a. It was filled with great stories of the hundreds saved,
 - b. And the power of God that had been manifested in verifying the message by signs & wonders.
 - c. Not only did the miracles *verify* the truth of the Gospel *for the Gentiles*,
 - d. It *validated* for Barnabas & Paul that *what they were doing* in preaching to the Gentiles was God’s will.
 - e. He wouldn’t be verifying their message by such incredible signs if He didn’t approve of it
 - f. And that was the *point* they meant to get across as they shared in Jerusalem.

B. V. 13-21

13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me:

1. When Barnabas & Paul finish their report, amplifying everything Peter had said before them, James stood up and began a *formal conclusion* to their meeting.
2. That’s what the words, “Men & brethren, listen to me . . .” mean; they’re the introductory remarks of a judge who’s now declaring the final verdict.
3. Just who is this *James*? It’s not the brother of John; he’s been martyred a few years before.
4. This James is *Jesus*’ brother; the author of the NT Book of James.
5. The question that troubles the astute reader is why is he acting as *the* leader of

- the Church in Jerusalem? Why isn't Peter or one of the other *original* Apostles in that position?
6. The answer lies in realizing this *proves* the early church was modeled after the Jewish synagogue.
 - a. The synagogue had a council of elders, over which presided a *chief elder*, known as the archsynagogus = "ruler of the synagogue."
 - b. When he died or retired, he was replaced by his *closest male relative*, if he satisfied the requirements for spiritual & social maturity.
 7. James was Jesus' closest male relative. And his character was ultra-exemplary.
 - a. The 20 years since the resurrection till this point have seen James become a *towering figure* in the Church at Jerusalem.
 - b. He was known by both believers & unbelievers as "*James the Just*" because his wisdom & virtue were unimpeachable & well-known.
 - c. He was also referred to by the endearing term – "*Camel-knees*" because he spent so much time kneeling in prayer he developed thick calluses on his knees.
 - d. James was esteemed by all as a standout in his devotion to God and his zealous pursuit of holiness.
 - e. The Judaizers thought James was their chief ally in the debate over the fate of Gentiles.
 - f. They were *surprised* when he finally spoke, because he showed that while he was *personally* devoted to a careful observance of the Law,
 - g. He recognized the wisdom & rightness of what Peter had said & knew God accepted Gentiles *apart* from their conversion to Judaism.

14 Simon

8. James wisely uses Peter's Hebrew name - **has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:**
 9. Now James quotes both Isaiah & Amos . . .
 - ¹⁶ 'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; ¹⁷ So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD WHO DOES ALL THESE THINGS.'**
 10. James centers what was happening among the Gentiles *in* God's Word.
 11. He gave what they were experiencing the *proper perspective*, one drawn from the Word.
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| 12. There are a couple important lessons we can glean from this we'll examine on Wednesday night. |
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13. This morning, let's dissect what James says here.
 - a. During David's reign, especially in the *early years*, many Gentiles *were drawn to faith* in the God of Israel because of the *beauty of David's relationship with Him*.
 - b. It wasn't a religious or showy deal—it was a *simple* but *sincere & fervent*

- passion* for God that spilled over into all he did & said.
- c. Very simply – David’s devotion to the Lord was *attractive*.
 - d. He wasn’t perfect; he made some *colossal errors*,
 - e. But his *love for & relationship with* God was so vibrant & real, so intimate –it drew others in, including many Gentiles.
14. The prophets foretold a time when what had been true of David would be renewed in & by his later descendant – the Messiah; *Jesus*.
 15. Gentiles would once again come to faith in God thru the example of an intimate relationship with Him.
 16. That’s precisely the good news the Gospel declared.
 17. David’s greater Son had come to open wide the doors to fellowship with God through faith, not works.
 18. Now – here’s the thing: Salvation by faith, was the way God had always planned it; so James says . . .
- 18 “Known to God from eternity are all His works.**
19. The Gospel was no late innovation, something totally new.
 - a. Salvation by grace through faith was the way it had *always* been.
 - b. *Grace* was not a last minute addition, an amendment to the divine plan because not enough people were making it to heaven.
 - c. *Faith* had always been the bottom line in being right with God.
 - 1) *Abraham* was justified by faith.
 - 2) *Moses* said that the essence of the entire law was summed up in the call to love God with all you’ve got.
 - 3) *David*, the one described as being after God’s own heart said, “One thing have I desired of the Lord and that will I seek after, just to dwell with the Lord 24/7.”
 - 4) *All the prophets* had called the people to return their *hearts* to the Lord.
 20. What James said in v. 18 was a serious challenge to the Judaizers to rethink their position, drawing some radically different conclusions from the one’s they held.
 21. Their fastidious devotion to the Law *ought* to have gone *instead* to an *appreciation of grace*.
 22. If they’d spent as much time *preaching the Good News* to the lost as they did trying to get the already saved jumping through religious hoops, they could have been a huge asset to the Kingdom.
- 19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,**
23. There it is—Gentiles do **NOT** have to get circumcised, keep kosher, observe Sabbath & keep the other over 600 rules of the Mosaic law.
 24. Faith in Jesus as Lord & Savior *satisfies* God’s requirements & if they have that, because they’re in relationship with Him, He’ll teach them what they need to know & show them how to walk in holiness.
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25. But having settled the *theological question* about what Gentiles must do to be saved,
 26. James moved to the *practical matter* of how Gentiles & Jews were to relate *to one another*.

27. You see, the **problem** their decision left them was the age old concern of **contact** between Jews & Gentiles.
- Jews couldn't have a close relationship with Gentiles because a good part of the Gentile lifestyle was immersion in practices that rendered them religiously **unclean**.
 - The Jew who wanted to maintain fellowship with God was prohibited from close contact with Gentiles.
 - Yet being followers of Jesus meant **walking together** in faith.
 - A close relationship between Jewish & Gentiles believers wasn't an option –
 - Jesus had made it quite clear mutual love & care was **THE** distinguishing mark of His disciples.
28. The Jerusalem Council had decided **Gentile** believers weren't going to be required to observe the rituals of the law, but **Jewish** believers still did; it was part of their culture.

So—see the problem?

29. Because unity among believers was an essential for a healthy spiritual life, James set out some **guidelines** to ensure the 2 groups could interact in a normal & healthy way.

20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

30. There were synagogues all over the Roman Empire & beyond.
31. In these synagogues were **both** Jews & God-fearing Gentiles—a portion of whom would come to faith whenever the Gospel was preached, just as Paul & Barnabas had **proven** on their first journey.
32. The question was—how are these 2 groups, Jews & Gentiles going to maintain fellowship?
33. Here's how: Remove the main causes of stumbling that offended **Jewish scruples**.
34. James listed 3 things the Gentiles needed to abstain from . . .

#1 – They were to stay away from things polluted by idols.

- Much of the meat offered for sale in the marketplace of Greek & Roman cities was **leftovers** of sacrifices made in pagan temples.
 - The priests burned a portion of each sacrifice,
 - But sold the main part to a local butcher who cut it up for sale.
- Jews considered such meat an abomination because it had been devoted to a false god.
- Most Gentiles thought nothing of it; it was just meat. Who cares where it came from?
- So one day after church, Demetrius invites Levi & his family over for a BBQ in the back yard.
 - The kids are playing a game of *Rome* on the Playstation .5
 - The wives are chatting in the kitchen.
 - Demetrius & Levi are standing at the Weber Kettle as Demetrius flips

the tri-tips.

- 4) He slices off a little piece & hands it to Levi, who takes it, chews & swallows with a loud “Yum” & asks, “That’s good. It’s so **tender**. Where’d you get that?”
 - 5) Demetrius says, “Oh, at *Aphrodite’s Club*”
 - 6) Levi immediately turns green & hurls, then red with anger, storms into the house, grabs his kids by the hand & yells to his wife to follow him; they’re leaving—NOW!
 - 7) As he storms out the door he shouts back at the stunned Demetrius – “You idiot Gentile! Are you trying to KILL MY FAMILY!”
- e. Most Jews had a fierce **hatred** of & knee-jerk aversion to idols.
 - f. In earlier generations, idolatry had been the **cause** of Israel’s troubles so idols were totally off-limits.
 - g. **Any** traffic with them was **unthinkable!**
 - h. The reason Jews wouldn’t eat with Gentiles was because of a fear of having a plate of this kind of meat put in front of them.
 - i. So James gave this guideline to ensure Gentiles & Jews could maintain fellowship.

#2 - They were to stay away from sexual immorality.

- a. **History** tells us the sexual mores of the Greek & Roman world were atrocious at this time!
- b. Several social commentators of that day decried the decadence of many cities in the Empire.
- c. It seemed the higher in society one rose, the more debauched people became.
- d. Gentiles, uninformed by God’s moral code, felt no reluctance in being involved sexually with **anyone** of **any sex** or **age**.
- e. This led to a corruption & weakening of civilization that some historians say contributed to the fall of the Empire to the Barbarians.
- f. They say Rome wasn’t so much conquered as that it rotted from within.
- g. Gentile believers needed to understand that Jesus had saved not only their spirit, but their soul & body; He redeemed the whole man/woman, including their sexuality.
- h. They could no longer continue in the lifestyle of the world.
- i. As Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians, **sexual sin is unique** because it affects the **inner** person.
- j. Sexual immorality is a sin that must be put away to **protect** the integrity of the Church as a whole.
- k. It’s a sin that if not repented of & turned away, will **tear** a congregation apart.

#3 - They were to stay away from strangled animals & blood.

- a. These 2 go together & once again have to do with **diet**.
- b. A large part of social interaction in the ancient world was around **meals**; eating was a central fixture of social events.
- c. Now, because the Law strictly forbade eating blood, the Jews had strict rules for butchering meat to make sure all blood was drained off. [Lev.

17:10-13]

- d. Gentiles used non-kosher practices of killing animals for butchering, including strangling animals & leaving them for a while till the blood *saturated* the tissues.
 - e. Jews simply could *not* eat this kind of meat. But Gentiles had *no qualms* about eating *kosher* meat.
 - f. So for the sake of the *conscience* of their Jewish brothers & sisters, it would be best for Gentiles to alter their behavior *in light of Jewish scruples*.
 - g. Paul expands on this idea of being sensitive to the scruples of weaker believers in Romans 14.
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35. The important thing for us to remember today is that these 3 things were *simply guidelines* to *safeguard* close fellowship between the followers of Christ.

C. Vs. 22-29

²² Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. ²³ They wrote this letter by them:

1. The Council finished, the verdict in, they write an official letter to the church at Antioch & send it via Paul & Barnabas & a couple other of the leading elders who will act as official representatives of the Jerusalem Church.

2. Here's the letter, Luke records it verbatim . . .

The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment—

3. The original teachers who'd said Gentiles had to convert to Judaism were **NOT** sent by Jerusalem, though they'd claimed as much.
4. They were **NOT** endorsed by the Apostles or elders.

²⁵ it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

5. When they composed the letter, they lumped the more *ritual* issues of diet together & put the ban on sexual immorality last.

III. CONCLUSION

A. The Importance of Unity

1. As we end, I want to ask you to stop & consider how **crucial unity** was in the early church.
 2. The issue of what to do with Gentiles who were coming to Christ was the **first great theological crisis** the Church faced.
 3. They resolved it handily by looking to Scripture & the counsel of the Spirit.
 4. But once the theological & doctrinal details were settled, they moved immediately to the **practical** implications of how the entrance of Gentiles would **affect the unity of believers**.
 5. The potential for conflict between Gentiles & Jews was **huge** because of their divergent cultures.
 6. So, James spelled out **guidelines** they need to **immediately install** to make sure no rift occurred.
 7. He knew that as Gentiles walked with Christ, they'd **grow** in holiness & sanctification.
 8. But the issues of diet & morality would prove to be an **immediate stumbling block** to fellowship, and THAT was simply unacceptable!
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9. Realizing how important **unity** was to these first believers, we have to ask – How important is it to us?
 10. Are we protecting & safeguarding unity among those around us, or are we allies of the enemy sowing discord through envy, gossip, criticism, conflict, anger, bitterness, & enmity?
 11. Are your choices aimed at unity & fellowship or division & hostility?
 12. Maybe – neither. Maybe **indifference** toward the Family of God is your mode.
 13. Remember that when Jesus called the disciples to follow Him, it was a call to follow **alongside others**.
 14. He said **THE distinguishing mark** of belonging to Him would be the **LOVE** we have for one another.
 15. **Psalm 133:1** • Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
 16. I end with this story -
Some missionaries in the Philippines set up a croquet court in their front yard. Several of their tribal neighbors became interested and wanted to join the fun. The missionaries explained the game and started them out, each with a mallet and ball.
As the game progressed, opportunity came for one of the players to take advantage of another by knocking that person's ball out of the court.
A missionary explained the procedure, but his advice only puzzled the tribal man.
“Why would I want to knock his ball out of the court?”
“So you will be the one to win!”
The national only shook his head in bewilderment.
Competition is generally ruled out in a hunting & gathering society, where people survive **not by competing** but by **sharing equally** in every activity.
The game continued, but no one followed the missionaries' advice.
When a player successfully got through all the wickets, the game was not over for him.

He went back to give aid & advice to his fellows.

As the final player moved toward the last wicket, the affair was still very much a team effort.

And finally, when the last wicket was played, the 'team' shouted happily, "We won! We won!"

That is how the Church, the body of Christ, *should* be.

We're a team.

We walk & win *together*.