

UNSTOPPABLE GOD'S WORK
IN THE WORLD**RELIGIOUS PEER
PRESSURE**

Lesson 17

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How far would you go in accommodating and fellowshiping with Christians with radically different cultural customs? Sadly, I have seen many instances where people have asked the opposite question: what is the minimum amount of difference that would justify me not having anything to do with them?

This is the question at hand in Acts 21:17–26. Paul and companions arrive in Jerusalem and meet James and the other elders. They get a warm welcome. They were bringing the gift of money from the Gentile churches for famine relief, but Luke concentrates more on the report of what God has done among the Gentiles. Everyone praised God when they heard all about it.

But there was an issue—and it seemed on the surface to be a big one. We read it in verses 20–21. Many thousands of Jews in Jerusalem had come to believe that Jesus was the Christ. They were committed to Christ but zealously Jewish in their cultural practices and traditions. They had heard that Paul taught Jews living elsewhere in Gentile provinces to turn away from Moses and from those cultural practices they held so dear.

So here is the question: Are there two incompatible doctrinal positions? The Jewish church teaching salvation through adherence to Moses and Mosaic law practice, the Gentile churches teaching salvation by grace? And another, moral, question in verse 24: people have heard that you don't live according to what God revealed and that you aren't interested in obeying the Old Testament.

The answer is that both James and Paul had already agreed that salvation is by grace and not by works in Acts 15. Therefore, this is not a discussion about how you get saved. It is a discussion about customs that some people still held that were very important to them. Therefore, as far as Paul was concerned, they fell into the category of "matters of indifference." If the argument had been that people were saved by these customs, we would have seen a very different response.

How does Paul deal with matters of indifference? He entirely goes along with them for the sake of relationship. Some might think he perjured himself by participating in a purification rite that he knows contains no significance for salvation or discipleship... This is "becoming like the people I am with in order to win some—like a Jew to the Jews, like a Gentile to the Gentiles." Here is the principle: forbear with others in matters of indifference. Participate with them. Be friends with them. Encourage them.

But one more thing needs to be said: we need to be careful to distinguish what are matters of indifference and what aren't. I think there are twin dangers: elevating to primary importance things that aren't—like style of meetings—and thereby refusing to have fellowship with people we should; or, demoting things that are of first importance—like core doctrines—to secondaries for the sake of wanting to be friends with everybody.

Unless we are sure not only what we believe, but why we do, we won't know how to make that distinction.... The lesson from Paul is to bend over backwards to accommodate cultural practice and custom, but not wrong doctrine.¹

OPEN IT

1. **Growing up what peer pressure existed around you? When, if ever, did you succumb to the pressure? Was it worth it?**

READ IT

Acts 21:15–26

EXPLORE IT

2. **To where was Paul traveling? What did he need to deliver to the church there?**
3. **Who did Paul meet with when he got to his final destination?**
4. **What did James and the other elders tell him about the advancement of the gospel?**
5. **What concern did the elders have concerning Paul?**
6. **What did they ask Paul to do as a result of their concern?**

¹ Devotional Blog by Marcus Honeysett found @ <https://marcushoneysett.squarespace.com/blog/fellowship-with-christians-who-arent-like-me-acts-2117-26.html>

APPLY IT

CATCHING UP WITH FRIENDS

Arrangements had been made for Paul and his team to stay at the home of a transplanted Cypriot Jew named Mnason. Mnason had been part of the Jerusalem church from its beginning. “An early disciple” (Acts 21:16 NKJV) indicates he may have been one of the original three thousand believers (see Acts 2:41). It was easier for a foreign-born Jew than for a Judean-born Jew to host Gentiles. After unpacking at Mnason’s pad, the travelers met James and the Jerusalem elders. They presented the gift from the Gentile churches (see Romans 15:25; Acts 24:17). Luke doesn’t mention the gift. Evidently the gift seemed incidental compared with the exciting things Paul had to report about God’s work among the pagans:

- Opening Europe (Macedonia, Greece) to the gospel (see Acts 16)
- Introducing Athenian philosophers to their “unknown God” (see Acts 17)
- Transforming lives in Corinth (see Acts 18; 1 Corinthians 6:10–11)
- The bonfire of magic books and occult paraphernalia in Ephesus (see Acts 19)

The Gentile brothers with Paul shared their spiritual experiences and verified his report. The Jewish brothers responded with worship.²

7. **Paul and the Jerusalem elders spent time reporting on what God was doing in their churches. What are some different ways you are seeing God at work in your church?**

As this group of leaders met, Paul recounted the amazing work of God in saving Gentiles all over Galatia and Asia Minor. He did so “in detail,” which means that he gave particular details rather than a general summation of what God was doing amongst the nations. This was not the first account of God’s work in this regard. In chapter 15, Paul had previously met with probably many of the same leaders when he recounted God’s gracious work of salvation amongst the nations. But that was many years earlier. Now, they heard that God was continuing to build His church amongst the nations. When they heard this report they “glorified the Lord.” That is, this gloriously good news of the powerful effects of the good news caused these men to worship.³

8. **How can others’ “ministry reports” cause you to take greater steps of faith and move you to deeper times of glorifying God in worship? When has God used someone else’s story to move you to greater Christian service?**

² Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4687–4695). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

³ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @<http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/between-a-rock-and-a-stoning/>

9. In verse 20 we see that different individuals spoke about what they had been busy doing for the gospel, and yet Luke says that only God was glorified. When we are successful in ministry, how are we to balance the glory we get with God's glory?

MONEY TALKS!! WHAT IS IT SAYING?

We could wish that Dr. Luke had told us more about that first meeting with the church leaders in Jerusalem. James and the other leaders did receive them gladly, but how did they respond to the gift from the Gentiles? Nothing is said about it. Were some of them perhaps a bit suspicious? A few years later, the Roman writer Martial would say, "Gifts are like hooks!" and perhaps some of the Jerusalem elders felt that way about this gift.⁴

10. Paul delivered the gifts that the Gentile churches raised to bring relief to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. How would these gifts help foster reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile believers?

It is odd that Luke does not mention the presentation of the gift or the response of the Jerusalem leaders to the gift. Different theories have been proposed for why Luke omits what to Paul was so important. F. F. Bruce suggests that the Jews may have viewed Paul's gift as undermining or competing with the temple tax.⁵

Unfortunately, the gift in this case didn't actually accomplish the unifying purpose Paul hoped it would (Rom 15:31). It's possible that the "more right-winged elements in the church were distinctly cold towards it" (Marshall, *Acts of the Apostles*, 342).⁶

11. What concerns might the Jerusalem Christians have had in receiving this large sum of money? How would Paul's report have helped alleviate their fears?

⁴ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Daring (Acts 13-28): Put Your Faith Where the Action Is (The BE Series Commentary)* (p. 113). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-57-when-godly-man-errs-acts-2115-40>

⁶ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 7385-7387). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

12. How can our giving to the church for the advancement of the gospel bring unity to people today?

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

You get the impression that the legalists had been working behind the scenes. No sooner had Paul finished his report than the elders brought up the rumors that were then being circulated about Paul among the Jewish Christians. It has well been said that, though a rumor doesn't have a leg to stand on, it travels mighty fast!⁷

13. In light of what has transpired in verses 17–19, how might you have felt if you were in Paul's place? What would have been your first reaction to such criticism?

In a nutshell, Paul was being slanderously misrepresented. It would appear that the church leaders understood this yet could not simply ignore it. They knew that it had to be addressed and they assumed that this was the perfect opportunity. Perhaps they figured that Paul could once and for all put such slanderous accusations to bed. If so, they were sadly wrong. Before moving on it is worth noting again Paul's humility. There is no suggestion that he was defensive; instead, he was willing to be a part of a solution. In fact, it is quite possible that this was unwise counsel from the church leadership, and yet Paul submitted to them. This would further indicate Paul's humility. We can learn from this that concern for an effective ministry of the gospel is far more important than our own vindication.⁸

14. Luke makes no mention of Paul's response, which implies that Paul probably remained silent amidst these accusations. When is it wise to remain silent when you are accused, and when it is wise to speak up and defend yourself?

⁷ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Daring (Acts 13-28): Put Your Faith Where the Action Is* (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 113). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @<http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/between-a-rock-and-a-stoning/>

15. While it seems as though the elders in Jerusalem loved Paul and believed in his ministry, how does their response to this situation seem unwise in leadership and uncaring to Paul's feelings?

We have to try to imagine the searing pain that this must have brought to him. Paul had been planning this visit for at least two years. He had made a considerable sacrifice in coming to Jerusalem. He had come with a gift, a substantial amount of money gathered from the largely Gentile congregation in Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia. We must try to imagine how they brought this money—in heavy sacks of coins, no doubt. It was in all probability sitting on the floor in the middle of the room where Paul, James, and the elders were meeting. But there was no mention of it from the men in Jerusalem. No fluent expressions of gratitude! No expressions of unworthiness at so generous a gift from men and women whom they had once counted as “dogs” and of whom they remained deeply suspicious.

However, we view this scene, an odor of ill manners rises from the room. Everything within us recoils as we read it. Where is the love? Where is the gratitude? Where is the desire to “believe all things” before rushing into judgment? What James and the elders are saying to Paul is, in effect, “Jewish believers don’t trust you, Paul!” What we should be reading into it is: “And neither do we.” It has been twenty-five years since Saul of Tarsus had first come to Jerusalem and revealed to the disciples that he had been converted on the Damascus road. But even so, the church in the mother city remained deeply suspicious of him, even hostile toward him. Despite all that he had done, Paul was the victim of a whispering campaign that soured the hearts of believers toward him. This is an ugly scene.⁹

16. The people in Jerusalem seemed to be holding on to long-lasting grudges against Paul. How do we free ourselves from doing the same thing? How might living according to 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 have changed this scene?

James should have known better, and certainly should have defended Paul rather than throw him to the wolves. He took the worst possible interpretation rather than giving the apostle Paul the benefit of the doubt. It is a line too often taken in the church today. One hears a report about a brother from a disgruntled faction, and instead of diffusing the situation, fuel is added to the flames by granting the accusation pride of place at the next meeting of church leaders. James could have pulled Paul aside and listened to his side of the events before arranging a meeting of the elders. He could have acted as Paul’s advocate in the meeting, diffusing the inevitable tension. These scenarios are not unknown in our own sphere. Have we ever called down a brother or sister by painting him or her in the worst possible light?¹⁰

⁹ Thomas, Derek W. H. *Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries)* (p. 605). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

17. How do we go about balancing our call to believe the best in people and our use of discernment to spot the wrong others are doing?

SAME OLD SITUATION, SAME OLD SONG AND DANCE

These were Jewish Christians who remained devoted to the ceremonial aspects of the law. While not viewing it as a means of salvation, they still observed its required feasts, Sabbath regulations, ritual vows (v. 23), and dietary restrictions. Why were they still clinging to the customs and rituals of the Old Covenant? First, because those customs and rituals had been established by God. Coming to faith in Jesus Christ enhanced these Jewish believers' love for God and desire to obey Him and thus may have motivated a greater zeal for the old ceremonies. Second, the apostles and other leaders in the Jerusalem church did not oppose the continuation of these practices. Nowhere in the New Testament are Jewish believers condemned for observing them.

In fact, Paul commands tolerance for such "weaker brothers" (Rom. 14:1ff.; 1 Corinthians 8–10) until they grow to understand their freedom and can use it with clear consciences. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), while forbidding the imposition of Old Covenant rituals on Gentiles, did not prohibit Jewish believers from continuing to observe them. God Himself was tolerant during this period of transition, knowing how difficult it was for the Jewish Christians to break with their past (see the discussion of this point in chapter 12 of this volume). He also knew that in a few years this would no longer be a dominant issue in the church. After the Jewish revolt against Rome (A.D. 66–70), which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem, the influence of the Jerusalem church waned. Christianity gradually became a predominantly Gentile faith, and other churches (such as Antioch and Alexandria) ascended to the forefront.¹¹

18. While Old Testament rituals were worthless in garnering salvation, what benefits might some of these have brought those who still adhered to them after receiving Christ? Are there any modern equivalents today?

At some point in the discussion, someone came up with a plan that was intended to put such misrepresentations and misunderstandings to rest. It would involve Paul's openly participating in a Jewish ceremony. The intended effects were that Paul's critics would see that he was neither opposed to Moses nor critical of the Jewish way of life. He was not "anti-temple." Four men had apparently taken a Nazirite vow.... While the Bible does not specify the nature of a Nazirite vow, it was usually taken in response to some favour received from God and so was a thanksgiving offering. These four men, who were obviously members of the church in Jerusalem, were soon to bring their Nazirite vow to

¹¹ MacArthur, John. *Acts 13-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series)* (Kindle Locations 4673-4686). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

its ceremonial conclusion. This took place at the temple. The leaders of the church saw it as an opportune time for Paul to show his Jewishness in such a way that his critics would be silenced. At least, that was the plan.

Paul was encouraged to go along with these men to the temple for this ceremony. Further, he was encouraged to finance their offerings, which would have been a considerable sum (see Numbers 6:14–15). The effect of this, of course, would be to show that Paul was not opposed to ceremonial customs contained in the law of Moses, and his generous financial support would be further vindication of his love for his people. And of course, since this would take place at the temple, the critics could see that Paul was not out to destroy the temple. There is, however, another action here that would further vindicate Paul.¹²

19. Scholars are divided on whether Paul’s compliance to this plan was wise leadership or simply a falling to peer pressure. Do you believe that Paul did the right thing by following the plan? If not, what should he have done instead?

20. Paul found himself in an impossible spot where he would anger people no matter what he did. What can you learn from this text that will help you navigate seemingly impossible situations in the future?

¹² Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @<http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/between-a-rock-and-a-stoning/>

Note: This study was compiled, and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups