

**2024 Theme - Focus On What Matters**

**Sermon Series - The Book of Acts/God's Plan for His Church**

**Sermon Title - Doctrine: Critical and Crucial**

**Sermon Text - Acts 15:1-11**

**Sermon Presenter - Dr. Jeff Nave**

Even though some things are changing in our world and in our church, God's word is not one of them. God's love for us remains and is as sure as it has ever been. And the preaching and ministries of Northshore Church will continue to be grounded in the eternal Word of God.

This morning, we are continuing our journey, together as a body of believers, through the book of Acts and the real-time account of the significant events that make up the history of the early church. We'll look specifically at the events recorded in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. If you open your Bible to this chapter, you may see the heading, "Council of Jerusalem" or "Jerusalem Council." We will examine together the events surrounding the first significant doctrinal debate that took place in the early church.

This debate set some Jewish Christians against the growing number of Gentile Christians who had come to faith in Christ, as a result of the preaching and missionary efforts of the Apostle Paul.

It's hard to look at these events that took place in Jerusalem some time ago without reflecting on the news coming out of Jerusalem in our time. As modern Christians, we trace our faith back to foundations shared with modern Judaism. But if we were to describe our relationship with Israel and Judaism on Facebook, we would probably say, "It's complicated."

As believers in the authority and trustworthiness of God's Word, we read the promises of God to Abraham and Moses and the Prophets. The broader story of the Old Testament is marked by cycles of faithfulness and unfaithfulness on the part of Israel, but God remains faithful to his promises; to Abraham and to us.

There is a wide range of opinions about the current conflict in Israel and Palestine. Traditionally, conservative evangelicals have stood on the side of Israel when she has faced armed conflict with other nations or groups. In a formal sense, the nation of Israel is an ally of the United States and is one of few nations in the region that shares our system of governance.

Conflict in the region is not new, but lately we've seen evidence of atrocities and suffering that's hard to ignore.

Also of late, there has been a shift in the position that some in our government and some in our Christian community have taken in relation to the nation of Israel. While this shift and resulting debate should not take our focus off of the character and purposes of God, it's hard to look at our

scripture this morning without wondering how our relationship with Israel has changed over the years and to ask the question, “How would Jesus have us respond?”

I’ve read a lot of articles, listened to pod casts, and had conversations with people who hold a range of opinions on this issue, and I keep coming back to the words recorded in the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Two short verses give us a glimpse into the heart of Jesus. I’ll begin reading in verse 41.

**Luke 19:41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it**

**Luke 19:42 and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.**

The modern nation of Israel is home to many different people groups:

Israeli Jews, Israeli secularists, Israeli Christians, Israeli Messianic Christians, Druze, Bedouin, Aramaic Christians, Palestinian Arab Muslims, Palestinian Arab Christians, and even a few Palestinian Arab Jews.

As we prepare to receive a message from God’s Word, let’s pray together for all of these people groups, that their eyes would be opened to the only one who can bring them peace.

<Prayer>

As we begin to look together at our main scripture this morning, we are joining a great story already in progress. You may recall from other sermons in this series that the early church was growing as Paul and others carried the Good News of Salvation to the region surrounding Jerusalem.

The sick were being healed, the lame walked and the blind were given sight as the Holy Spirit of God worked through those who were spreading the truth about God’s love for all. Local churches were established and growing and beginning to send out missionaries of their own. Gentile Christians had begun to outnumber Jewish Christians in many of these new and growing churches. Not everyone saw this as a good thing.

Let’s read together the account in Acts 15 of a problem that arose and the response of early church leaders. I’ll begin reading in verse 1 of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter.

**Acts 15:1 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.”**

**Acts 15:2 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.**

**Acts 15:3 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.**

**Acts 15:4 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.**

Looking back on these events, we may take the outcome for granted. But if things had gone a different way, we might still be struggling with some serious misconceptions about God's love and his plan for us.

A serious question of *doctrine* had arisen.

**Doctrine is... "A body of beliefs about God, man, Christ, the church, and other related concepts considered authoritative and thus worthy of acceptance by all members of the community of faith." (from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)**

The assertion of the folks who our scripture says came down from Judea was a doctrinal claim. It fits within the specific doctrine we call soteriology in fancy seminary circles. It's the doctrine, or foundational truth about, salvation. The claim was, "One of the things that is necessary for salvation is circumcision."

Paul and Barnabus recognized this claim as a threat to the Gospel of Christ. It wasn't just wrong, it was a claim that had the potential to split the growing church into factions, and to push away or confuse those Jesus was calling to Himself. The response of Paul and Barnabus provides us with a clear answer to this historical challenge to the doctrine of salvation; and a template for responding to other questions that may arise.

Our translation of the scripture uses the phrase, "sharp dispute" to describe the response of Paul and Barnabus to the claim of those who had come down from Jerusalem. I don't think our faith supports or requires of us that we place ourselves in sharp dispute in response to everything we disagree with.

Having clear beliefs about what is right doesn't require us to get in an argument with everyone who disagrees with our position. Even within our denomination or right here in our own church, there may be issues about which there are differences of opinion or conviction.

Rupertus Meldenius, was a seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian who wrote,

**“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”**

This short statement provides a clear framework for addressing any difference of opinion within the church.

There are issues about which we cannot simply agree to disagree. The claim that circumcision or anything else must be added to the Biblical prescription for Salvation is a claim we cannot accept or fail to challenge.

As with any challenge to the foundations of our faith, our first step should be seeking clarity from Scripture. Fortunately, God’s Word is abidingly clear on the requirements for receiving forgiveness from sins, salvation and eternal life.

Some time after the Jerusalem Council, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome to reinforce their understanding of the doctrine of Salvation. In the book of Romans, chapter 10, he reinforced the settled truth beginning in verse 9.

**Romans 10:9-13 (NIV)**

**9 If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. 11 As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”**

Paul also wrote to the church at Ephesus to reassure the Gentile believers of the soundness of their Salvation. In Ephesians chapter 2 we find great clarity in this matter beginning with verse 8.

**Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)**

**8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.**

But before the Jerusalem Council, and before the Apostle Paul was transformed on the road to Damascus, Jesus Himself made clear the scope and terms of the Salvation His death would purchase for us. His words in John 3:16 are well known, but not universally recognized as the greatest promise ever made in heaven and earth.

**John 3:16 (NIV)**

**16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

The first century church had experienced explosive growth as people from many tribes and nations took Jesus up on this promise.

In our passage this morning, Paul and Barnabus responded to an issue that simply could not be allowed to go unchallenged. It was potentially a deal breaker that could have resulted in a fundamental split between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

The believers in the local church at Antioch had a clear understanding of the doctrine of Salvation. They sent Paul and Barnabus, and some others, to the Mother Church in Jerusalem to challenge the claims made by believers coming from that congregation. Though the disagreement was serious, the first action taken by Paul and Barnabus and their home church was intended to seek unity and resolution.

They could have said, “This is too big an issue for us to work out, we just need to part ways with those who claim to share our faith in Jerusalem.” Instead, the body of believers in Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabus to travel to Jerusalem in hopes of restoring the unity of the early church.

**1. Our first response to conflict within the Community of Faith should be to seek unity.**

I get a deep sense of being in the presence of God when I read the words that Jesus prayed for you and me in the garden shortly before his crucifixion. Consider a short passage from his prayer recorded in John chapter 17.

**John 17:20-21 (NIV)**

**20 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**

Jesus prayed for the unity of those who would come to believe in him. We should seek and pray ourselves for the unity of the church as he taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The trip from Antioch to Jerusalem was about 300 miles. So, like a trip to Birmingham, on foot. Even though they had important business awaiting them, Paul and his traveling companions didn’t just put their heads down and trudge all the way to Jerusalem. As more than just a practical matter, they stopped at churches along the way and spent some time telling fellow believers about all the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ. Though their mission was

serious, they were celebrating along the way because God was continuing to draw people to Himself for Salvation.

I wonder if we are faithful to this example. Let's look back at Jesus prayer for us as his church. He prayed that we would practice unity for a purpose. Let's consider again verse 21.

**John 17:21 (NIV)**

**21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**

The purpose of the unity we should be seeking is a witness to the world that will draw others to belief in God. It is the clear testimony of Scripture that God is seeking to save all men and women. The fact that some will reject his offer of Salvation breaks His heart. He knew you before you were ever conceived and has been longing for a relationship with you. Consider the words recorded in 2 Peter, verse 9.

**2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)**

**9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

Also consider the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, verse 7.

**Luke 15:7 (NIV)**

**7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.**

**2. We should rejoice about the things that cause God to rejoice.**

There is no issue we face as individuals or a church that should prevent us from celebrating when we see someone receive Christ as their Savior.

When Paul and his traveling companions finally made it to Jerusalem, they didn't walk in the door and start an argument. Their cause for rejoicing was shared by many in the Jerusalem church. It was while they were telling about the way God was working in the lives of Gentile believers that a group of Jewish believers, we have come to call Judaizers, stood up in the middle of the celebration and said the words we see recorded in verse 5 of our text. Let's rejoin the story there.

**Acts 15:5-6 (NIV)**

**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.” 6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question.**

Though they were on the wrong side of this doctrinal debate, I would like to take a moment to offer a brief defense of these Jewish believers. At the very least, I think it serves us to understand the motivation behind their position.

While our portion of scripture doesn't say so explicitly, there is evidence that those who called for continued enforcement of all aspects of the Mosaic law were given a fair opportunity to make their case. The scripture tells us that:

6 “The apostles and elders met to consider this question.”

And that it was only 7 “After much discussion,” that Peter shared a final statement on the matter.

Some had genuine concerns about relaxing the established rules. Without unpacking everything that went into the orthodox practice of Mosaic law and the sacrificial system, we can get a sense of what was going on here. It's an oversimplification that runs the risk of offense to Jewish tradition, but it was sort of like when folks who have been a part of a church for a long time say, “We've always done it this way.”

I have less than positive feelings about this statement. But in an age when many are deconstructing their faith, we should be careful of the notion that just because something has been around a long time, it must be suspect. Many of the traditions of our faith provide needed structure, and remind us of the central truths around which we find the unity our Savior wants for us.

I'm sure that many of the faithful Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem Church were struggling to resolve some of the teachings of the Torah with Christ's fulfillment of law and final once-and-for-all satisfaction of the requirements of the sacrificial system. Even as we look back on the teachings in our Old Testament, it can be hard to see how it all fits together. We want to be faithful to the teachings of God's Word in both the Old and New Testament.

Modern Biblical scholars have begun to use the phrase, “Grand Narrative” to describe the story that flows through the scriptures from beginning to end. We cannot explore this entire Grand Narrative in the time we have this morning, but we can appreciate the importance of considering the full counsel of God's Word, Old Testament and New, when we are seeking clarity on any question of doctrine.

I believe that the, “much discussion” our scripture tells us took place at the Council of Jerusalem was focused on finding the truth about Salvation that is supported by the full story of God's plan to save us.

Let's look again at what happened as a result:

**7 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. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 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? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”**

Whenever we are faced with the requirements of tradition, we must take care to bring our practices into harmony with this teaching on the doctrine of Salvation, and the whole counsel of God's Word. Some traditions will not survive this test of fidelity to the teachings of Scripture. Other traditions endure and strengthen the community of faith and our connection to those faithful believers who came before us.

**3. We should keep and celebrate the traditions of our faith that are supported by the teaching of God's Word.**

Some traditions are well founded in the scripture as practices of the early church that have continued down through the ages. A great example is the practice of corporate singing of hymns and worship songs. Music and singing were clearly a part of Temple worship in the Old Testament, and we see direct evidence of the practice among Jesus' disciples and in the early church.

**Matthew 26:30 (NIV)**

**30 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

Other practices in the modern church are an expression of obedience to the direct instruction of Scripture. We celebrate the ordinance of Baptism and the Ordinance of Communion because we were explicitly commanded to do so by Jesus himself.

Jesus gave us the example of Baptism, and explained to his disciples that it was his intention for all believers to follow this example.

**Matthew 28:19 (NIV)**

**19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,**

We followed these instructions as a community of faith during our service last Sunday.

This morning we will observe the Lord's Supper; also called the ordinance of Communion. In doing so, we will follow the example of the disciples as they ate with Jesus, at his request, on the final night before his crucifixion; and the example of members of the early church who regularly gathered together to share this symbolic communion meal.

There is some variation among Christian traditions when it comes to the ordinance of Communion, Holy Communion or the Eucharist, as it is sometimes called. But all traditions agree that it is more than just eating a piece of bread and drinking of the cup; in our case grape juice to symbolize wine. In the act of eating and drinking we receive the presence of Christ in a renewed and meaningful way while contemplating his life and death.

Before we take the elements of Communion together, I'd like to read to you the instructions for receiving Communion given by the Apostle Paul to the first century church at Corinth. I'm reading from 1 Corinthians 11:23-29.

### **1 Corinthians 11:23-29 (NIV)**

**23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.**

It's clear that the Apostle Paul wanted to help the early church avoid the kind of meaningless ritual Jesus had condemned in the religious leaders of his day. At Northshore Church, we do not limit access to the Lord's Supper. We do, however, agree with the Apostle Paul that the elements of this symbolic Communion meal should be taken only by those who have acknowledged their sin, called on Christ for salvation, and who are willing to take this time to think about the terrible price that was paid for our sins on the Cross.

We have been reminded this morning of the clear truth about our need for forgiveness. And the clear testimony of Scripture that what is needed is the simple acknowledgement that we are sinful and in need of a Savior. We can be saved if we bring the truth of our sin to Jesus and ask him to apply the merit of His sacrifice to our debt.

If this is a step you've never taken, I want you to know that I prayed for you this morning, and have been praying for you. Each Sunday morning, I take a walk and pray in preparation for our

services. I pray that if there is anyone who attends our gathering who has not yet responded to the offer of Salvation, that they would not leave without knowing that God loves them, that they need Him, and that they can begin a relationship with Him today.

Let's pray.