

2024 Theme - Focus On What Matters

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

Sermon Title - Making the Message Accessible without Watering it Down

Sermon Text - Acts 15:12-33

Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry McEwen

Introduction

"Blessed assurance Jesus is mine, He's been my fourth man in the fire time after time
Born of His Spirit washed in His blood, And what He did for me on Calvary is more than enough"

You may or may not know what the song's talking about when it says "He's been my fourth man in the fire time after time." But you might remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to bow down and worship a golden idol that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had told the king this...

Daniel 3:17 "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand.

Daniel 3:18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

So they are thrown into the fire and then this happens: Nebuchadnezzar said...

Daniel 3:25 "...Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

He then called for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out of the fire, and to everyone's amazement, not even a hair was singed and they didn't even smell like smoke! Sometimes in life we are thrown into the fires of difficulties, hurts and pain, but if we decide, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to trust the Father, we will overcome! Amen! Let's pray!

I just want to say thank you all so much for the beautiful retirement party, the cards, the video's, the kind words, gifts, amazing food, and most of all for allowing me the privilege to be your pastor all these years! What an honor! So in life there are good times, hard times, and times of transition! But God is faithful. And here's something to remember...

Not all the fires we face in life could be compared to a literal fiery furnace, but sometimes they can surely come close. As Dr. Nave shared last week, the leaders of the New Testament church were confronted with serious doctrinal issues in the Church and it threatened their very unity! I can only imagine the weight that Paul, Barnabus, Peter and James were carrying! They probably felt as if they were in a spiritual fiery furnace!! Sometimes equally genuine people can have very different viewpoints and opinions on what God's will is! But as Dr. Nave shared so powerfully last week, Jesus wants His church to be unified, especially in the main things! Once again, let me quote the Lutheran theologian Dr. Nave quoted last week, Rupertus Meldenius, a seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian who wrote,

"In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

Such good wisdom, but sadly, too often ignored! Barnabas, Paul, Peter and James, on the other hand, seemed to follow that wisdom to the T! They each had a part in handling the conflict facing the New Testament Church under the leadership of The Holy Spirit! We will see a beautiful outcome as they share with the Church how to make the message of the Gospel accessible without watering it down! Let me remind you of something Jeff shared last week. It's Peter's words to the council in Jerusalem, found in Acts 15:7-11...

Acts 15:7 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.

Acts 15:8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

Acts 15:9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Acts 15:10 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?

Acts 15:11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The next verse begins our text for this week, Acts 15:12-33. Right after Peter spoke, this happened...

Acts 15:12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Acts 15:13 When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me.

Acts 15:14 Simon (Peter) has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

Acts 15:15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

Acts 15:16 "'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,

Acts 15:17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things'

Acts 15:18 that have been known for ages.

Acts 15:19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Acts 15:20 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.

Acts 15:21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Acts 15:22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.

Acts 15:23 With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

Acts 15:24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

Acts 15:25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul--

Acts 15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

Acts 15:28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

Acts 15:30 The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter.

Acts 15:31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

Acts 15:32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

Acts 15:33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

James, the brother of Jesus, not wanting to overburden the gentile converts led the council to adopt four basic injunctions. In these four injunctions we learn that we must uphold the intention of the law without becoming legalistic, judgmental, prideful or unloving. It is my prayer today that each of us can learn how to hold to our God-given convictions and at the same time remember the extremely important advice of James...

Don't become legalistic

Don't become judgmental

Don't become prideful

Don't become unloving

Where I'm I getting these four things? From the four injunctions James shared twice in our text...

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

According to the Oxford Language Dictionary, "An injunction is an authoritative warning or order."

According to Cornell Law School, "An injunction is a court order requiring a person to do or cease doing a specific action."

James came up with four injunctions, things they were to cease doing, for a reason? Let's look at the four things James said they would encourage the gentile believers to abstain from and his reasoning behind his decision. We'll then look at the overall principle that each of these injunctions represent and how they apply to our lives today. James said...

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols...

Why did James encourage the new believers to abstain from food sacrificed to idols? The reason was this...

Food sacrificed to idols risked offending

Paul said this to the Corinthian church...

1 Corinthians 8:4 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one."

1 Corinthians 8:5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"),

1 Corinthians 8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

1 Cor 8:7 But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.

1 Cor 8:8 But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

1 Cor 8:9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Paul went on to say this...

1 Corinthians 8:13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

In other words, my witness to others and what would be best for making the gospel accessible to them, should always take priority over my personal rights or freedom! Back in our text, James continues...

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood...

Why did James encourage the new believers to abstain from blood? The reason was this...

Blood represented life

Life is precious! The Jewish people were not to eat the blood of an animal, but were to pour it out on the ground as an offering recognizing that something had given its life to sustain their life. This is pointed out in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy...

Deu 12:23 But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat.

Deu 12:24 You must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.

James was not changing one legalistic requirement for another! He knew and it had already been clearly stated that a person is saved by grace through faith...

Acts 15:11 ...We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved...

And when Jesus shed His blood on the cross for our sins, we must remember that His blood represented His perfect life, given in exchange for our imperfect lives. We will see in a moment why these four injunctions were given. But first let's look at the next one...

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals...

Why did James encourage the new believers to abstain from the meat of strangled animals? The reason was this...

When an animal is strangled, the blood cannot be properly separated from the flesh

Once again, while the new converts were not under the law but grace, they needed to acknowledge the sanctity of life, to be sensitive to those around them and understand how their actions could affect others. James says plainly...

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

Why did James encourage the new believers to abstain from sexual immorality? The reason was this...

Sexual Immorality dishonors your body which is a temple of the Holy Spirit!

Paul said this to the church at Corinth...

1 Cor 6:18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.

1 Cor 6:19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;

1 Cor 6:20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

I want to point something out to you! Many have missed this, but it is such an important truth. Paul said to “flee from sexual immorality!” Flee, run, be very afraid, don’t think you can flirt with sexual temptation and walk away unscathed! Notice this: God’s Word tells us in James’ epistle:

James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Simply amazing! Have you ever noticed that? James says we can actually stand up to the devil and he will flee from us, but Paul tells us to flee sexual immorality! Don’t resist, run! That’s a very powerful and important piece of information! Now, I want us to understand that these four injunctions actually boil down to two injunctions that Jesus gave us! Ready for this? When asked what were the most important injunctions in God’s Word...

Mat 22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

Mat 22:38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

Mat 22:39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Mat 22:40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Folks, that's the message Jesus came to preach! And the message of the Gospel, the Good News, is that Jesus went to the Cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and to give us power over sin so we could actually keep the greatest commands! The leaders of the New Testament Church were struggling with...

How do we make the message of the gospel, the good news of God’s Grace accessible to the lost without watering down our convictions or the truth of God’s law?

Sometimes the way to do something is by not doing something else! There are four things we must not do if we want to make our message accessible to the lost.

1. Don’t become legalistic!

It is so important to know what we believe and why. It is so important to have convictions and stick to them. Once again, Dr. Nave touched on this last week when he said,

“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.”

There was a popular country song a number of years ago by Aaron Tippin that had a line that said:

“If you don’t stand for something you’ll fall for anything”

Christians need to stand for their convictions, but we don't have to be angry about it and we certainly don't have to be mean about it! And while he didn't say it last week, Dr. Nave has famously said, "Just be nice!" I once heard a statement attributed to Gandhi when he was asked what he thought about Christianity. It is said that he responded with these words...

"I like their Christ, I just don't like their Christians."

I guess he had met some rather obnoxious people who claimed the name of Jesus, but did not act or live in the way that Christ would have wanted them to live! They were evidently very legalistic, demanding, and not loving in the way they presented the Good News of Christ Jesus. Remember the word Christian, doesn't just mean saved or not, it means Christlike! Christ-i-an! Like Christ or Little Christs! If we are not going to be legalistic we must...

Remember the intent of the law

Paul reminded us of this in at least two places...

Gal 3:24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. The law was not bad, but it was limited in its effectiveness

And then we read in Romans 8...

Rom 8:3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man,

Rom 8:4 in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

That is the Gospel, "Good News"

If we are always legalistic and negative, people will not see our message as "Good News!" In fact they will run from us when they see us coming! You see, the injunction to abstain from food sacrificed to idols was not about being legalistic, it was about caring for the souls of others! This leads me to the second thing we don't want to do if we are to make our message assessable.

2. Don't become judgmental!

It's not your place to judge. How can you anyway when you have no way of knowing other people's circumstances or their hearts? It is our place to love others and to set an example, leave the rest to God! Sometimes when bad things happen to bad people, it may be tempting to say, "well, they got what they deserved!" But I've known some bad people who did some bad things, and later repented and were broken and saddened by the things they had done! And sometimes, when I learn their backstory of being abused as a child or neglected, while it

certainly doesn't excuse their bad behavior, it sure helps explain it! I wish I could just forget everything I did as a rebellious teenager, but I don't want to ever forget that without the grace, mercy and forgiveness of Jesus, I would have slipped further into my depravity and farther away from all the good Jesus had planned for my life! I do not have a foot to stand on when it comes to judging others, because of my past, and as I've said before, I'm no better than the worst sinner, I'm just better off, because I said yes to Jesus and He said yes to my cry for help! Jesus said...

Mat 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

Mat 7:2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Mat 7:3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?

Mat 7:4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?

Mat 7:5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

In other words...We all have areas of our lives that need work. All of us. Have you ever thought about how insane and humorous at the same time these words of Jesus are? Picture someone with 2x4's protruding out of their own eyes, trying to remove a splinter from someone else's eyes! They would be hitting the other person in the head with their beams! And remember this: another person may have issues that are more easily seen and stand out, but the Bible tells us to remember, we all have issues.

1 John 1:10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives.

That's tough! Think you can do no wrong, then you've made God out to be a liar! John reminds us that we should not think too highly of ourselves and God's Word tells us not to think too lowly of others! You see, the injunction to abstain from blood had to do with understanding the sanctity of life, and when we have a judgmental spirit towards someone we are not valuing them as a person or their life! This takes us to the third thing we must never do if we want our message to be accessible to non-believers.

3. Don't become prideful!

Pride comes before the fall! Pride causes a person to think they are better than others! Pride causes a person to forget where they came from! The writer of Proverbs says...

Prov 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

Prov 16:19 Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.

Prov 16:20 Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.

You may think pride and a haughty spirit are only issues with lost people, but some of the most prideful people I've ever met are religious. A haughty spirit and self-righteous pride will eventually cause you to fall down and stumble! Pride can destroy many things like your effectiveness, your witness, and your testimony! What did the writer of Proverbs say in that last verse?

Prov 16:20 Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.

We must keep a teachable spirit, (I don't know everything) and we must trust the Lord (not our own efforts) Remember what Paul said to the church at Corinth...

1 Cor 1:25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

1 Cor 1:26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

1 Cor 1:27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

1 Cor 1:28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are,

1 Cor 1:29 so that no one may boast before him.

1 Cor 1:30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

1 Cor 1:31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

So what does the injunction against eating an animal that had been strangled have to do with the injunction to not be prideful? It goes back to the fact that life is precious, and not just yours! Prideful people are generally more concerned with their own selfish wants and desires and could care less about the needs or the lives of others. That's certainly not what God wants for you and me! Following the injunction to not eat a strangled animal was to serve as a reminder and emphasis of the importance of life!

This leads me to the last thing we must never do if we are to make our message accessible to non-believers.

4. Don't become unloving!

Don't become unloving in your attitude! Don't become unloving in your speech! Don't become unloving in your actions! Remember...

Attitude affects everything

Paul affirms this...

Phil 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Phil 2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Phil 2:5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

What was His attitude?

Compassion. Touching the untouchables. Lovingly sacrificing for others! He even forgave those who hurt Him!

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

So if you don't want to become unloving you must...

Be careful what you say

1 Pet 3:8 Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

1 Pet 3:9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

1 Pet 3:10 For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech.

1 Pet 3:11 He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it.

If you want to be loving you must remember...

Your actions say it all!

James 2:15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

James 2:16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

James 2:17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Of course we never want to get to a place where we are enabling bad behavior, but there's ways to help people without doing that if we are willing to take the time and effort to do so! The fact is the world will not hear our message until they see our message. You are the Lord's billboard. You are the Lord's media outlet for His message! You are His facebook message, you are His instagram, you are His TikTok video to the world! You may not have thousands of followers, but

you may have more than you think, and if it's only one, your witness to that one follower is more important than you could ever know! The question is...

What is your life broadcasting to the world, to your spouse, your children, your co-workers, fellow students, your friends?

You might wonder how the injunction to abstain from Sexual immorality relates to the injunction to not become unloving? It's simple really, sexual immorality is selfish and shows no concern or care about the well being of the other person or how they may be hurt! Remember that God's design for our sexual expression is best! Again, James was not setting up rules and regs for how to be saved. Because our salvation is a gift that is not deserved, cannot be earned, and is not for sale!

Bottom line of Salvation, as Dr. Nave reminded us of last week is this...

Ephesians 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

Ephesians 2:9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We are not saved by our good works, but we are saved to do good works!! But as we do our good works through the help and power of the Holy Spirit, remember...

Don't become legalistic! Don't become judgmental! Don't become prideful! Don't become unloving!