

Title: The Inclusive Gospel

Subtitle: Gentiles are Welcomed into the Church

Fill-in: EVERYONE is WELCOME at God's table

The Empowered Church, Part 26

We are in Part 26 of our series The Empowered Church studying the book of Acts line by line. And today we are going to be in Acts 15, so if you have a Bible I invite you to go there. I've entitled this message *The Inclusive Gospel*.

The story we are looking at today is the turning point in the book of Acts, and outside of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, this is arguably the most consequential moment in the early church's history.

In this story a group of Jewish believers has to grapple with the question, what do we do with people who aren't like us?

This is, of course, is a question we have struggled with as a species. And, our track record as a human race is not great. Human history is, of course, littered with war, racism, and all sorts of division.

We are quite naturally suspicious and even judgmental of people who are different, and while few of us would admit it, many of us believe the world would be a better place if, gosh darn it, more people were like us.

And in a divided and suspicious world, followers of Jesus Christ are meant to be an example of radical inclusion. Our savior said before He ascended into heaven, go and make disciples of all nations. He did not say go import American culture into all nations or go enforce your culturally-driven moral standards in all nations, or go and fight a

culture war. He said go and make disciples, of all nations. Go and spread the message that peace with God is possible through faith in Jesus Christ, and that peace is available to all people regardless of their culture, background, fears, or past actions.

If you're following along on the bulletin or the app your fill-in-the-blank is this: Everyone is welcome at God's table.

That is our message, and it is radically inclusive. All are welcome at God's table and there is grace to spare. The challenges of radical inclusivity are many, and one of them is that we must get comfortable with people who are not like us. We have to get comfortable with people who might not share our moral standards. We have to get comfortable with recognizing that what we consider normal is actually really weird to people who don't share our cultural assumptions.

But this is part of what makes our faith so beautiful. You don't have to qualify for it. God lavishes His grace on all who would put their trust in Him.

The late Pastor Timothy Keller put it this way, "If you want God's grace, all you need is need, all you need is nothing."

At this point in the story the apostle Paul and his crew have been doing ministry among Gentiles, in other words, non-Jews. They've been telling them about Jesus, and Gentiles are coming to faith and becoming Christians. In fact, Acts 14 ends with Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch with tales how God was working among the Gentiles.

And with Gentiles now becoming Christians that meant that Jewish believers and Gentile believers were now part of the same faith. That is, of course, amazing, but it also meant Jewish Christians were learning to co-exist with people who did not share their cultural background, which was starting to create some controversy.

So let's jump in, Acts 15 verse 1

The Jerusalem Council

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." **2** And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. **3** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. **4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. **5** But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

So there is all of this excitement in the church in Antioch. Gentiles are getting saved, the church is growing, and there is all sorts of enthusiasm for what God is doing. But then some men arrive from Judea and they say hold up, in order for a person to be saved, not only do they need to profess faith, but they also need to be circumcised.

And it's safe to say that Paul was not having that. It says in verse two that they had "no small dissension and debate with them." In other words, things got pretty heated. They are arguing over whether someone is saved entirely by grace through faith, Paul's position, or if circumcision is required.

So they argue about it for a while and can't come to a resolution, so they agree that Paul and Barnabas will head up to Jerusalem to take this issue to the church leaders there. So they embark on a 250-mile journey to Jerusalem, stopping along the way to tell everyone about how Gentiles are coming to faith and that is a really great thing.

But then they get to Jerusalem and share that same report, and they run into some believers who were members of the Pharisees, and they insist that Gentile believers need to get circumcised and commit to obeying the law of Moses. Which, of all the ways to dampen enthusiasm for a movement, requiring adult circumcision has got to be high on the list.

But, all joking aside, the importance of this issue can hardly be overstated, because this is about the question of not only who can be saved, but how God saves us. This is a question about what qualifies us to sit at God's table.

Are we saved entirely by God's grace, or is it a combination of God's grace and our good works? Paul argued that it was grace. The Pharisees argued that circumcision and obedience to the law were part of the deal.

It's really easy to dog the Pharisees here. God is moving, people from outside of Israel are getting saved, the church is growing, and they're over here going (imitate voice) hold on everybody, what about circumcision? I mean, come on, are you really going to try to exclude people because of that?

But let's put ourselves in their shoes for just a moment. These Christian Pharisees were, in many regards, a product of their upbringing. They had been raised Jewish and had spent their entire lives learning about the importance of obeying the Law, and they had learned that circumcision was a mark of their identity as the people of God. And, Genesis 17 says exactly that.

And now these Pharisees who had become Christians looked out and saw all of these Gentiles coming to faith, and they were scared. They were scared that the high moral standards they had been raised with would be compromised as men and women who hadn't been trained in obedience to the Law entered the Church.

And we have to remember that for these individuals who had been raised in Judaism and who had been raised to understand themselves as the distinct people of God who were called out from among all the nations of the Earth to be God's special possession, the idea of sharing fellowship with those who were not circumcised and did not keep the Law was simply unthinkable.

See, we make a very serious error if we assume that, in this case, the Pharisees were bad people with evil intentions. They were converts to Christianity who loved Jesus and advocated for all they had ever known. This influx of people they didn't understand and who had a background they couldn't relate to was a lot for them to

process. They weren't opposed to God saving Gentiles, but they were nervous about the impact that would have on their community. So they did what they knew.

We can do the same thing when we see God moving among people who are different from us (i.e. "that's great that God is moving with those people, but they need to take a shower and dress better before they can come in here).

They insisted upon a course of action that had been normal for them their entire lives. If you are part of God's family that means you are circumcised and obey the Law. Those were the requirements for a convert to Judaism, so it made sense to them that it would be part of converting to Christianity. Were they misguided? Absolutely. But were their intentions wicked? Almost certainly not. In fact, I would go so far as to say that they were motivated by a desire to honor God and they had their Bible verses to back it up.

And, don't miss this, they didn't have a problem with Gentiles becoming Christians. They just wanted to make sure that the Gentiles behaved the same way that they did. And that was a problem. They thought they were serving God, but they were actually projecting their culture.

In Paul's earliest New Testament letter, the book of Galatians, he write in chapter 5, verse 6, **"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything, but only faith working through love."**

But let's be real honest here: We can sit here and stick our noses up at the Pharisees and say how silly it is that they would require

circumcision before they would accept someone into the family of God, but what requirements do we put in place? Do we give the impression that you need to dress a certain way, or speak a certain way, or vote a certain way before you can be welcomed into God's family?

What is the primary message that someone who is far from God hear's from the church? Is it God loves them, or is it 'fix your life, sinner.'

Do we expect people who are new to faith to adopt certain cultural practices that are normal to us? Do we expect people who are new to faith to live by biblical principles even though they don't yet know the Bible? Why do we do that? I think it is much easier to fall into the fall into the same mindset that the Pharisees had than we realize. We, like them, can have the best of intentions but can be sorely misguided. And then what happens is we can exclude people without even realizing we are doing it.

Instead of dogging the Pharisees, I want to ask, what part of that mindset is in me?

Part of the challenge with being part of a faith that is based on the idea that God freely gives us grace is that you end up around people who really need grace. And sometimes that freaks us out, so we look down on people whose need for grace is different than our own.

And part of what it means to participate in an inclusive faith is to learn to get comfortable with the discomfort of diversity of culture, preference, and thinking. It's learning to recognize that just because

something is different than what we're used to doesn't mean it's wrong.

And if we are going to really believe that we are saved by grace through faith we must learn to recognize that at the end of the day

whether you are clean-cut or disheveled,

whether you are rich or poor,

whether you've never so much as touched a drop of alcohol or you are currently battling addiction,

whether you are conservative or liberal,

whatever your sexual orientation,

immigration status, criminal record, age or gender,

every single one of us is equal at the foot of the cross and every single one of us is saved by grace through faith, and it is not of our own doing, it is the gift of God not the result of works so that no one may boast. We all need grace, and praise God that He freely gives it. We don't qualify for salvation, we receive it as a gift.

And what damage we do when we look out into the world and we say, oh yes, God's grace is totally for you, but I'm going to need you to handle that addiction first. Or, yes, you are welcome in God's family but first, you need to get your sexual orientation in order. Or, yes, there is grace for you, but you need to deal with your dysfunctional family situation first. And I could give a hundred other

examples. There is no “but first.” God’s grace meets us the moment we cry out for it.

Luke 18 - The broken person who asked for mercy was justified.

Don’t hear me saying that holiness isn’t a big deal or we should affirm cultural values that conflict with biblical values. Nothing could be further from the truth. Once we come to faith, our life becomes a process learning to live in joyful obedience to Jesus Christ in response to His love for us. Holiness happens when we live in community with people who love us as we study Scripture together. (Rom. 2, God’s kindness leads us to repentance).

But God’s table is open to everyone who would recognize their need for His grace.

I think too often we give people the impression that they have to completely have their act together before they can be accepted in Christian spaces. And when we do this we encourage fakeness. We create environments when people feel like they have to act a certain way or talk a certain way or think a certain way to be accepted, so they fake it.

Last Tuesday Pastor Lance was sharing with a group of our men about the importance of authenticity, and he said it’s important that we learn to be authentic because we can’t feel love through a mask. I would similarly say we can’t be transformed through a mask. When we give people the impression that they have to fake it to be accepted, we hinder their transformation. When we buy into the idea that we have to fake it, we hinder our own.

There are so many elements of being a pastor that are just so weird, and one of them is how much people feel like they need to adjust their behavior around you. Which just goes to show how much we've given people the impression that their acceptance.

PICKLEBALL STORY.

Let's keep going, verse 6

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. **7** And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, **9** and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. **10** Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

So all of the Jewish Christian leaders are debating and discussing this issue, and eventually Peter gets up to speak.

Now, remember it was earlier in Acts 10, Peter received a vision that he was to go find a Gentile man named Cornelius. And Peter finds Cornelius who has gathered up all of his family and friends, and Peter begins to explain to them all about Jesus. You can read the whole story in Acts 10, but Peter tells them about how peace with God is possible through Jesus Christ and how everyone who

believes in him will receive forgiveness through his name. And listen to what happens next, this is Acts 10 starting in verse 44:

“While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.” And it goes on to say that they were baptized.

So Peter has had this radical experience of seeing Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit, so now with the Jerusalem council, he says, remember, you all know that God chose for me to share the gospel with the Gentiles, and you know that God gave them the Holy Spirit, and here’s the real zinger, he said there is now no longer any distinction between us and them. In other words, we are all saved by grace through faith. Whether we are Jews or Gentiles we are not saved by circumcision, we are not saved by our obedience to the law. We are saved by our faith in Christ.

So why, he goes on to say, are you putting God to the test — an expression that literally means to interfere with His plans in a way that would provoke judgment — by asking the Gentiles to do what we can’t even do? We are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ and so are they.

In Romans 3, Paul speaks to a similar concept when he says starting in verse 20, **“For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”** In other words, because we cannot perfectly keep the law, the law makes us aware of our sinfulness. He goes on, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law,**

although the Law and the prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

We are welcomed at God’s table not because of our God works but because of God’s grace.

And I love verse 12

“And all the assembly fell silent.” Peter had his mic drop moment. I imagine all of the pro-circumcision folks looking at each other going, “Well, uh, yeah I guess that’s a good point.”

It says, **“And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”**

After Peter, Paul and Barnabas share their stories of what they’d seen in their travels, and they highlight that God had done signs and wonders among the Gentiles. In fact, in several of his New Testament letters Paul reminds his readers of the signs and wonders they had seen. The Holy Spirit’s power was shown to the Gentiles through the miraculous.

After Paul and Barnabas now James gets up to speak. If we think of this group of apostles and elders like a board, James was the chairman. Not only was he the brother of Jesus, but he was a man of unquestioned character.

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me.

14 Simeon (an alternate translation of Simon, who was Peter) has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.

Pause real quick. All the way back in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 14:2 God is speaking to Israel and he says, "**For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession.**" The idea that God had chosen them as a people was fundamental to Israelite identity, and now James is backing up Peter by arguing that God is making a himself a people for his name from the Gentiles.

Verse 15:

15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 "'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, **17** that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things **18** known from of old.'

James is citing a prophecy from Amos 9, and the prophecy declares that God will rebuild the tent of David that had fallen, and this would have been seen as a reference to the resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ, who came from the line of David, and then a remnant of Gentiles will seek the Lord. If you put all of that together, the prophecy from Amos points toward the present reality, James says, where Jesus Christ has defeated death and whereby Gentiles

are coming to faith. Everyone is welcome at God's table and that is by God's design, and James is pointing out that this prophecy old has come to pass. He continues, verse 19,

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

James does not directly state, “don't make Gentiles get circumcised, but he very clearly implies it by saying let us not trouble those Gentiles who turn to God.

Then in verse 20 he turns his attention to a very practical concern. In most cities, these new Gentile believers would live right alongside Jewish believers. These Jews had been raised their entire lives to observe specific food restrictions and to generally avoid interacting with Gentiles whenever possible. Now that they were going to be intermingling, some basic understandings needed to be established in order to keep the peace.

The first was things polluted by idols, and this is almost certainly a reference to meat that had been offered to idols. This was a common practice in the pagan world, but it was highly problematic for Jews. Eating meat sacrificed to idols was expressly prohibited in Exodus 34 and Leviticus 17.

Now I don't know about you, but avoiding meat that has been sacrificed to an idol is not a live issue in my life today. I'm not walking up to the meat counter at Raley's asking for two pounds of tri-tip and then asking, "And this cow wasn't sacrificed to Artemis, was it?" But in the first century meat was sacrificed to idols, and for a Jewish person to see someone eating that kind of meat would have been deeply troubling for them. I want to make sure this point is made as clearly as possible: For James to say that they should abstain from things polluted by idols was not about restricting their freedom but more about serving their Jewish brothers and sisters by not harming their conscience.

We talk about this often here at Bridgeway, but Christian freedom is not the idea that I can do whatever I want whenever I want with no restrictions or concern for others. Christian freedom is the freedom to serve and care for others because we are not consumed by our own interests.

In Galatians 5:13, Paul writes, **"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."**

Our freedom is meant to serve one another, so James is saying to Gentile believers, I know that eating meat sacrificed to idols doesn't bother you, but it really bothers your Jewish brothers and sisters, so how about you lay off of that for their sake?

A Christian who truly understands their freedom in Christ will say,

“Jesus was God in human flesh and He sacrificed all of His freedom for me, so it is my joy to sacrifice some of my freedom for you out of love for Him and love for you.”

When we justify offending others by saying we are exercising our freedom, we have strayed from a Christian understanding of freedom.

And the issue of not eating that which had been strangled or not had its blood drained was of similar concern, and these are references to dietary laws we find in the Old Testament. For example, right after the flood in Genesis 9 God tells Noah that they are not to eat animals that still have the blood in them.

The other command is that they abstain from sexual immorality. The Greek word there is *porneia*, which refers to any sexual behavior outside of God’s design for sex between a man and a woman in the context of marriage.

And this is not a sermon about sex, but these couple of words remind us that as followers of Christ we are called to a sexual ethic that is beautiful and wonderful and God-honoring, but is radical in the eyes of the world.

I was a teenager in the late 90s and that’s when I first became a Christian, so I made it in during a time when the basic message we gave teenagers about sex was, sex is gross, save it for the one you love. That is not, in my opinion, a particularly helpful message. And unfortunately, some version of that persists today.

The truth is, sex actually is not gross. Sex is a gift from God. And it is a gift God created to be enjoyed within the context of a lifelong marriage commitment. So let us not dishonor God by claiming that sex is gross or sex is something to be afraid of, and let us instead honor God's design for sex by affirming that it is meant only for the marriage relationship.

And if I can just be very frank, if that idea is provoking some guilt in you, there is no guilt in what I am saying. If anyone wants to judge you for whatever is in your past, that's their problem, not yours. There is only opportunity. Everyone is welcome at God's table. What you have is the opportunity for the joy and blessing of honoring God's design for sex as you move forward.

So James says, these are some basic ideas we need to get straight in order to live together in harmony, but outside of that, let us not burden our Gentile brothers and sisters with circumcision or full obedience to the Law.

Verse 22

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, **23** with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. **24** Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, **25** it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to

choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

I love the abrupt “Farewell” at the end there. No idolatrous meat eating, and if you want to get busy, put a ring on it first, and then... Peace.

But notice it says in verse 28 they wrote, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” What right do they have to say that? They can say that because they studied Scripture together, they looked at the work God was doing in their midst, and thus, they came to a conclusion that was consistent with the truth of the gospel and allowed Jewish and Gentile believers to live in community together.

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

The council recognized that at the end of the day, it's about Jesus, not adherence to the Law. And I just can't imagine how it must have felt for the Gentiles who received that letter to hear, you don't have to adopt a whole new culture and a whole new way of life. Just follow Jesus, and it is our joy to call you our brothers and sisters. That is radical inclusivity.

When we remember that we are all saved by grace through faith, we not only experience that grace ourselves but we can extend it to others. We can be men and women who don't seek to build barriers but instead seek to break them down in Jesus' name.

So I'm going to pray and I'm going to ask God that He would remind us of His grace and that He would empower us to be barrier breakers who carry forth the message of the inclusive gospel, that everyone is welcome at God's table.

Altar call prayer