

Main Idea: In Acts 15:1-21 we learn that the gospel is worth fighting for, but in a way that pleases God. The incident involves three scenes.

- I. The critics (1)
 - A. The problem occurred within the church.
 - B. The problem had to do with doctrine.
 1. Believing in Jesus is fine.
 2. Some say believing in Jesus isn't enough.
- II. The clash (2-5)
 - A. It started in Antioch (2).
 1. To differ over personal preferences is one thing.
 2. To undermine God's Word is another.
 - B. It ended up in Jerusalem (3-5).
 1. The news made some glad (3).
 2. The news made others mad (4-5).
- III. The council (6-21)
 - A. Peter spoke (6-11).
 1. Salvation is initiated by God alone (7-8).
 2. Salvation is received by faith alone (9).
 3. Salvation is made possible by grace alone (10-11).
 - B. Barnabas and Paul spoke (12).
 1. They didn't argue.
 2. They simply told what God did.
 - C. James spoke (13-21).
 1. He cited the testimony of Simon (13-14).
 2. He cited the testimony of Scripture (15-18).
 3. He offered his judgment (19-21).
 - We mustn't make salvation difficult.
 - We must teach saved people to prefer one another.

Make It Personal: Acts 15 teaches us to value three things...

1. We must value the doctrine of the church.
2. We must value the unity of the church.
3. We must value the mission of the church.

The book of Acts is timely for us, and we return there today as our God continues to make Himself known to us through His actions in the early church. We're right in the middle of the book, chapter 15, and it's here we find something very significant. A fight. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.” We are to be known for our love. But at times even those who love must fight. When? And how? The Lord wants us to know the answers to those questions. That's why He gave us today's text.

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:1-21

I'm not sure if it's true, but I read that an issue of *National Geographic* included a photograph of the fossil remains of two saber-tooth cats locked in combat. To quote the article: "One had bitten deep into the leg bone of the other, a thrust that trapped both in a common fate. The cause of the death of the two cats is as clear as the causes of the extinction of their species..."²

Those two saber-tooth cats aren't the only creatures on planet earth that have decided to fight each other. Some people thrive on conflict, it seems. Others will do anything to avoid it. Yet in reality, at times it is necessary.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Acts series at WBC in 2002.

² Taken from Peter A. Alwinson.

I've entitled today's message, "*The Gospel: Worth Fighting For, But in a Way That Pleases God.*" The gospel is worth fighting for. And I'm thankful that the Lord shows us how to honor Him when that becomes necessary.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus made a promise to His followers, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." *You will be*, He said.

But He never said it would be easy. In fact, His very words implied it *wouldn't* be easy. "You will receive power," He had said. You don't need power to do easy tasks.

The book of Acts records the activity of the church during its first thirty years of existence as it began its journey to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. It doesn't take long before we see potholes and roadblocks in its path. In Acts 2 three thousand people repent, believe in Jesus, and are added to the church, but in Acts 3 & 4 the church encountered intense persecution.

The roadblocks weren't always external in source. Some came from within the church. In Acts 5 there was the deception and sudden death of Ananias and Saphira. In Acts 6 there was the cry of favoritism from the Greek Jews against the Hebraic Jews concerning the care of their widows. But with the Spirit's help, the church maneuvered its way through each potential hazard.

More persecution came in chapter 8, so intense that many Christians had to flee their homes and head to foreign soil for safety. But the Sovereign Lord used even this to spread the news of the gospel to the unreached.

In Acts 10-11 the Holy Spirit made it clear it was time for the predominantly Jewish church to come out of its comfort zone and reach the Gentiles. With some persuasion, Peter obeyed, went to the house of Cornelius, and shared Jesus with his household. Thus, the final phase of Jesus' marching orders began, "You shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."

Somewhere around Acts 13 a shift occurs. For its first ten years of existence the early church was primarily Jewish and centered around activity in Jerusalem. But in Acts 13 the focus moves to 300 or so miles north to Antioch in Syria where the church is primarily Gentile. In fact, in chapters 13-14 the church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas to reach the Gentile world of Asia Minor with the gospel. Luke verifies the success of their efforts in Acts 14:27, "On arriving there [back in Antioch], they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."

It was a glorious time. The church was moving ahead just as Jesus both commanded and predicted. Less than twenty years after Jesus returned to heaven there were followers of Christ not only in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but also in the Gentile world of Asia Minor. And the churches there were primed to keep moving forward. Yes, there was reason to celebrate!

But not everybody did. Know this. If we're going to fulfill our mission and make disciples of Christ worldwide, we must overcome all kinds of barriers and challenges. Some come from a hostile world on the outside. But some of the trickiest come from right inside the church. That's what happened in Acts 15.

Acts 15 is a watershed event for the early church. It was make-or-break time, as we'll see. We need Acts 15 today. We need the kind of discernment the church exhibited. We need to know what's worth fighting and dying for, and while many things aren't, the gospel certainly is. There are three scenes in Acts 15:1-21.

I. The critics (1)

"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

Though the direction was north, the elevation dropped, so Luke says some critics came *down* to Antioch. He refers to them as “some men from Judea.” Who were they? They’re unnamed. Galatians 2:12 seems to indicate they were sent by James, but James himself later said in Acts 15:24 that these men lacked authorization from the apostles and elders to teach what they taught.

Notice a couple of things about the problem at hand.

A. The problem occurred within the church. We’re told that some men came from Judea (that’s where the church began) to Antioch (that had become the new base of operations for the church). These men weren’t hostile opponents coming from the Jewish Sanhedrin or some pagan temple. They were church members. They professed faith in Christ. But in reality, they were in essence wolves in sheep’s clothing.

B. The problem had to do with doctrine. They said, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” For the Jews circumcision was the badge of proof that you belonged to God. It was the sign of the covenant. To be circumcised represented one’s willingness to live by the Mosaic law. When parents circumcised their baby boy, it showed their submission to the Mosaic law. When a Gentile became a Jewish proselyte, he had to be circumcised to verify his willingness to live according to Mosaic law.

The teachers’ message was dogmatic, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you *cannot* be saved.” In other words, “It’s great that you have Jesus, *but...* you need more. Didn’t Paul tell you? Well, that’s why we’re here. You need Jesus *plus* circumcision. You need Jesus *plus* you need to keep Moses’ law. And let there be no misunderstanding. This isn’t optional. If you’re not willing to be circumcised, you *cannot* be saved.”

The issue wasn’t whether Gentiles could be saved. It was *how*.

It’s been nearly two thousand years since those men caused a stir in Antioch. They’re long gone, but their message continues to cause havoc. It’s the message that says...

1. *Believing in Jesus is fine.* “Yes, believe in Jesus, by all means!” they say. As do we. To be saved a person must believe in Jesus (Acts 16:31). But...

2. *Some say believing in Jesus isn’t enough.* “Unless you—fill in the blank—join *our* church, you cannot be saved.” “Unless you’ve *been baptized*, you cannot be saved.” “Unless you *use our version of the Bible*, you can’t be saved.” And here’s a sticky one...

“Unless you *live a good life*, you cannot be saved.” Is that true? Granted, a saved person will want to live a good life, but is living a good life a requirement for salvation? Are we saved because we believe in Jesus *plus* live a good life?

This wasn’t the first time Paul faced these critics known as the Judaizers, nor would it be the last. If we’re going to understand this battle, some dates are important.

The Historical Background: On Paul’s first missionary journey he led people in southern Galatia³ to Christ around AD 46 (that’s Acts 13). He then made his return trip to ground them further in AD 47 (that’s Acts 14). Many scholars feel he wrote the letter of Galatians to them around AD 48 or 49, just a year or two after his departure.⁴

Why would Paul send a letter so soon after leaving these churches? It wasn’t to find out about the weather. Something terrible had happened. Paul had caught wind of an emergency situation in Galatia. Some teachers there were undermining his work by teaching heresy. What’s worse, the church members were falling for it. In Galatians 1:7, Paul says the opponents were “trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.” The false teachers were Judaizers, men who preached a gospel of works.

³ Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe

⁴ I am assuming a "South Galatian theory" here. For development, see Wiersbe, pp. 682-3.

Whether or not these teachers were the same ones that came to Antioch, we don't know. But their message was the same. And their intent was the same. These men could count. They knew that before long the number of Gentile Christians would exceed the number of Jewish Christians in the church. They were afraid that the moral standards of the church would go down the tube if they didn't "straighten out" these new Gentile believers.

So they decided to do something about it. They trekked nearly three hundred miles north to Antioch and had a Bible conference. The theme? *The Christian and the Mosaic Law*. The conclusion? "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

How would you respond if someone came to WBC and preached that message? When Paul heard it, he said it's time for a fight, but we're going to do it God's way.

To put this in perspective, Paul wrote the letter to the churches in Galatia around AD 48 or 49. F. F. Bruce suggests that Galatians was written shortly before this Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Paul was in Antioch when he wrote Galatians. He was also in Antioch when these men from Judea came.

And they split the church. That's right. According to Galatians 2, these Jewish visitors did more than preach in the Antioch church. Galatians 2:12 says they refused to eat with the Gentile Christians (good Jews never ate with uncircumcised people). This would also mean they refused to participate in the Lord's Supper with their Gentile brethren.

It got worse. Peter happened to be in Antioch when these Judaizers arrived. Before their arrival Peter had eaten freely with the Gentile Christians. But after the critics got there and started teaching so dogmatically, he broke fellowship with the Gentiles, perhaps not wanting to "offend" his Jewish brothers.

Let that sink in. Without question Peter knew (intellectually at least) from his vision of the sheet in Acts 10:28 that God didn't want him to "call any man common or unclean." Yet when these visitors from Jerusalem came, he separated from his Gentile brothers.

Why? What was he thinking? I don't know. But whatever his motive, Peter's actions produced a terrible ripple effect. According to Galatians 2:13, "The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray."

Other Jews did what Peter did, including Barnabas. When Paul saw it, he took action. He knew that to refuse to have table fellowship with Gentiles today would lead to refusing to acknowledge them as Christians at all tomorrow. So he rebuked Peter publicly.

Apparently, and thankfully, Peter took the reprimand well, for as we'll soon see in Acts 15 he himself took the Judaizers to task in his message before the Jerusalem Council.⁵

So first of all, we meet the critics. Next...

II. The clash (2-5)

Actually, it was a twofold clash.

A. It started in Antioch (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."

I'm struck by those words "sharp dispute." The ESV says Paul and Barnabas "had no small dissension and debate with them." But Christians are supposed to get along with each other, aren't they? Yes, they are. Most of the time. But the truth is, there are times when "getting along" is a mark of disobedience to God. Jesus didn't get along with the Pharisees, but called them vipers, not because of a personal vendetta but because they were promoting a message that was keeping people out of heaven.

⁵ I am indebted to the historical background provided by F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, pp. 298-304.

Some things aren't worth fighting for. Granted. But some things are. When wolves attack your sheep, it's no time to look for a way to get along with the wolves.

1. *To differ over personal preferences is one thing.* And we have plenty of those. Like, worship styles, and social drinking, and political involvement, and wearing masks in church. These are matters of personal preference. We all have preferences—and that's fine—and in the church we need to learn to differ over these with grace and love. But...

2. *To undermine God's Word is another matter.* To hear a person say, "You need to agree with my preference or someone *cannot* be saved," is unacceptable on their part. But it's also unacceptable for us to hear it and remain silent if it's being taught in our church.

This clash in Antioch was no small matter, as the church recognized. So they appointed Paul and Barnabas, along with some others, to go and consult the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Notice that the church as a body has authority over its parts. The church sent their leaders to Jerusalem. Thus, the clash that started in Antioch...

B. It ended up in Jerusalem (3-5). Verse 3 explains what happened en route, "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 brothers very glad."

As the representatives headed south, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria. And when the believers there heard that God had saved Gentiles, they rejoiced. Their God was giving them new brothers and sisters, and that made them happy.

But they must have been sad too, for when they heard about this controversy, they must have known that they had something to gain or lose personally in this whole debate. They weren't Jews either. Were they going to need to do something else to be saved, too?

Let the power of this narrative sink in.

1. *The news made some glad (3).* In fact, verse 3 says they were "very glad" to hear that new people, *different* people had joined their ranks as followers of Jesus.

I wonder what makes us very glad. Some of us are too easily satisfied. What makes us glad is to win the ball game or to close the big deal at work or take the vacation, not bad things certainly, but just not worthy of being *very glad* about, not when compared to this.

When a sinner repents, the angels rejoice in heaven. Do we? To see a hell-bound person come to know Christ—and better yet, to have a part in leading that person to Christ—is to see something that will matter for eternity! The ball game, the deal at work, the vacation, these won't really matter much one hundred years from now.

It's interesting how the same news affects people differently. It made some *glad*...

2. *The news made others mad (4-5).* "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.⁵ 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 obey the law of Moses.'"

Here's the second clash. Some professing believers in Jerusalem heard this news and said, "We don't like it." And why didn't they? Because, says Luke, they were believers *AND* they belonged to the Pharisees' party. Almost sounds like a contradiction in terms. We follow Jesus, *AND* we belong to the group that called for His crucifixion.

We're in trouble when we become, "I'm a Christian *AND*." I'm a Christian *AND* I'm a Republican. *AND* a Baptist. Or, *AND* whatever. The problem is that the second term tends to shape our identify more than the first.⁶

The Pharisees were legalists, "separated ones," as the term indicates. In short, they often tried to legislate godliness by requiring obedience to laws and rules.

⁶ Paul himself later will say in Acts 23:6, "I am a Pharisee," but it was Christian capital "C" and Pharisee "small p."

Please notice there's no room for dialogue with these folks. "The Gentiles *must* be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses," they said. They didn't ask the apostles and elders what they thought. They simply promoted themselves as the self-appointed decision-makers for the church, and for God.

So what are we going to do? We're supposed to love each other. That's what Jesus said. But we have a significant point of disagreement between us. Here's the issue again. Can a Gentile become a Christian in one step, or does he have to become a Jew first and then a Christian, a *two step* process? Are people saved on the basis of believing in Christ's work alone, or do they need to do something else?

Here's the answer, scene three. We've seen the critics and the clash. Next...

III. The council (6-21)

According to verse 6, "The apostles and elders met to consider this question." In other words, the church leaders went into executive session, and verse 7 indicates they engaged in "much discussion."

Is that significant? Very. When there's a disagreement in the church, who do you want deliberating? In America, everybody has a right to speak. Just look at social media, and the outcome of social media. Now look at the first century church. When they had a disagreement, who did the deliberating and talking?

Would a person who had come to know Christ just a few months prior to this controversy in Jerusalem be able to contribute to this discussion? Maybe. Maybe not. But he certainly wouldn't be able to think as carefully about this delicate subject as men who'd known and studied the Word for years, as the apostles and elders had.

The Lord doesn't want His church making significant decisions by mere democratic process. That's why He gives His church elders, who devote themselves to His Word and prayer, who deliberate and then teach the rest of His people, what they've learned, and why it matters.

Luke records the contribution of four servant leaders in the discussion that followed.

A. Peter spoke (6-11). "After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them..."

William LaSor makes a good observation about what happened that day:

"At first, there was 'much debate' (15:7). There usually is, in a meeting of this sort.

After many persons have spoken, often in a disorganized manner, the true leaders—those with true leadership ability, and not necessarily those who occupy office (although the latter are often the same as the former)—the true leaders begin to crystallize the problem, state the essential issues, and suggest the approaches to a solution."⁷

May I say this? Peter was no pope, not here, not ever. We don't Peter functioning as an autocrat here. He didn't even speak up until after there had been much discussion [KJV 'disputing']. The elders and apostles hashed over the issue and reflected on what the Scriptures said, and then, at that point, Peter got up and summarized the issue.

There's a time to listen. And to stop listening and speak. A leader must lead.

Apparently, Peter surmised before others did what was stake here. This was not a matter of personal preference. This was about the most fundamental of all matters. *The gospel.*

So Peter stood up and spoke up. In his brief message, he reminded his peers of three truths pertaining to the gospel, which is the good news of how God saves sinners.

1. *Salvation is initiated by God alone (7-8).* "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."

⁷ William LaSor, *Church Alive*, p. 229.

Peter reminds his brothers of the trip he took to the house of Cornelius. That had happened *ten years* earlier. They hadn't forgotten. When Peter returned home from that trip the circumcised believers *criticized* him, saying, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them (Acts 11:3)."

Oh, they knew about that trip. Apparently they had forgotten why it happened in the first place, so Peter reminds them.

I didn't volunteer for that trip! *God* chose me. God sent me to tell Cornelius the gospel. And here's one of the biggest surprises. God didn't even wait for me to finish my message, nor for Cornelius and his friends to make a profession of faith. While I was still preaching (Acts 10:44 says), God the Holy Spirit came on those Gentiles, making it clear to all of us that salvation is initiated by God alone.

2. *Salvation is received by faith alone (9)*. Peter continues, "He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith." Notice, it happened *by faith*. God didn't wait until the Gentiles were circumcised to accept them. So why should we? What right do we have to impose an extra requirement that God Himself didn't?

Friends, I saw it happen, says Peter. God accepted them. God purified their hearts *by faith alone*.

This is true for any sinner, my friend. If you want a clean heart before God, you can experience it right now. How? Put your faith, your total trust, in the Savior Jesus Christ and in what He accomplished when He died on the cross and left that tomb alive. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and God will purify your heart.⁸

3. *Salvation is made possible by grace alone (10-11)*. "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers 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."

Do we ever think that people have to become like *us* in order to be saved? The critics thought they were helping God out. Peter says no. You are *testing* God.

Know this. Every person—that includes the Ph.D. as well as the child who's still learning to read—must enter God's family the same way. It's by God's initiative, by faith alone, made possible by grace alone. To enter God's family, we must cast ourselves on the mercy of God and admit we don't deserve such an honor and certainly could never earn it.

The following words by R. C. H. Lenski are worth pondering, "To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior, is to put something human on a par with him, yea to make it the crowning point. That is fatal. A bridge to heaven that is built of 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge. Even if Christ be thought of as carrying us 999 miles of the way, and something merely human be required for the last mile, this would leave us hanging in the air with heaven being still far away."⁹

Salvation is initiated by God alone, is received by faith alone, and is made possible by grace alone. That's true for everyone, Peter says, whether Jew or Gentile. Next...

B. Barnabas and Paul spoke (12). "The whole assembly¹⁰ became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them."

⁸ See Peter's description of a Christian in 1 Peter 1:1-2, "...sprinkling by his blood."

⁹ In J. MacArthur, p. 64.

¹⁰ This may indicate the "executive session" ended and the whole congregation reassembled.

I see real wisdom here. Notice Barnabas is mentioned first, indicating possibly he took the lead. Why? He was more respected in Jerusalem than Paul whom some looked at with suspicion until the day he died. And notice what they did.

1. *They didn't argue.* Rather...

2. *They simply told what God did.* And what God did among the Gentiles was the very same thing He had done among the Jews when the gospel came to them. He performed "miraculous signs and wonders." That evidence made it clear what God thinks about this debate. When we Jews first believed in Jesus God did signs and wonders to prove His Spirit had come (Acts 2). And when the gospel went to the Gentiles, God did the same thing.

The audience couldn't miss the implication. If God gave the Gentiles who believed in Jesus the Holy Spirit, what right do we have to impose another requirement?

A little bit of water can put a whole lot of people in a fog. Literally. According to the Bureau of Standards in Washington, a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet is composed of less than one glass of water. That amount of water is divided into about 60 billion tiny droplets. Yet when those minute particles settle over a city or the countryside, they can almost blot out everything from your sight.¹¹

Yes, a little bit of water can put a whole city in a fog. And a little bit of fuzzy doctrinal thinking can blur the vision of a whole church. At that point...

C. James spoke (13-21). The future of the Gentile world hung in the balance when James stepped forward. He wasn't an apostle, but an elder, and apparently the leader of the Jerusalem church. James was the half-brother of Jesus and had witnessed the resurrected Savior (1 Cor 15:7). It's said that his knees were as hard as a camel's because he knelt in prayer so often and for so long. He's the kind of person you want to speak in a meeting like this.

Something else makes James the ideal person to address the Jerusalem church. He was a Jew, and by conviction was a devout keeper of the Jewish law. We might say he's from the "old school," a born and bred local, and he responded in three ways.

1. *He cited the testimony of Simon (13-14).* "When they finished, James spoke up: 'Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.'"

Notice he uses Peter's Hebrew name and says in essence, "I agree with Simeon. This isn't about us, friends. This is about God. God has decided to take a people for Himself from the Gentiles."

2. *He cited the testimony of Scripture (15-18).* "The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶ 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 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' ¹⁸ that have been known for ages."

James quotes from Amos 9:11-12, with some phrases that sound similar to Jeremiah 12:15 and Isaiah 45:21. That's a great way to keep a controversy from being personal. Put personal opinions aside and look to the Scriptures! He cites Amos, a prophet who lived nearly 800 years prior, to say, "Listen. God told our forefathers 800 years ago He was going to reach and save Gentiles, and that's what He has done. Why are we surprised?"

3. *He offered his judgment (19-21).* "It is my judgment, therefore," James began, and offered a twofold solution to the controversy.

•We mustn't make salvation difficult. "We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God," James said in verse 19.

¹¹ *The Paper Pulpit*

How do we make salvation difficult? The Judaizers did it by adding circumcision. We can do it by adding other requirements, or by making people prove themselves to us, or by making the message too complex. Remember, to enter the kingdom Jesus said we must come as a child.

It's not all that difficult. Our job is to introduce people to Jesus. The Spirit's job is to regenerate dead hearts so people believe in Jesus. We must not make salvation difficult. On the sharing end, or the receiving end.

I think of people with whom I've shared the gospel, who refuse to believe in Christ because it's too simple. There must be more. We must not make salvation difficult, say James.

•We must teach saved people to prefer one another. I think that's what James had in mind by suggesting they send a letter to the Gentile Christians. Verses 20-21—
“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. ²¹ For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

We'll look at the specific issues more carefully next time, the Lord willing, but basically the letter asked the Gentile Christians to abstain from things that would effect the mission of the church. James isn't talking now about *prerequisites* for salvation, but the *evidence* of it. And a key evidence of salvation is that a person is willing to put the interests of others ahead of their own.

“Yes, we must accept our Gentile brothers as equals,” James insists. “But they must do the same with us. They are trying to reach their pagan neighbors for Christ, and we mustn't put burdens on them to make that more difficult than it is. But we're trying to reach our unsaved Jewish neighbors for Christ, and if these neighbors think we've abandoned God's law it will be the end further dialogue. It will go a long way to help our mission if our Gentile brothers refrain from the most offensive practices.”

This is important. Salvation isn't simply personal—about *me*. It's about a *people*. And James wanted both Jews and Gentiles to show their love for the people of God, the church, by taking steps to prefer one another.

So yes, the gospel is worth fighting for, but always in a way that honors God.

Make It Personal: Acts 15 teaches us to value three things...

1. *We must value the doctrine of the church.* Do you know what our church believes and why? Can you support from Scripture why you believe salvation is eternal, by grace alone, and not by works? I urge you to be a student of theology. Grow, grow, grow.

2. *We must value the unity of the church.* Far too often believers part company without humbly seeking to work through their differences, in submission to the Scriptures. We've seen a great example of how to do it in Acts 15. Now let's do it.

3. *We must value the mission of the church.* Let's tell the world about Jesus, letting nothing stand in the way!

Closing hymn: “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place” #405 all four verses

Announce: Our next new members class is coming mid-Sept. I invite you to join us.