

You Are Sent, Vol 3

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Acts 15:1-35

MIS: "The gospel is worth fighting for."

Good morning, Mercy Church! Happy Juneteenth to everyone, especially to our AA brothers and sisters. Happy Father's Day!

We are continuing in our Acts series, You Are Sent. We are looking at the continued work of the Holy Spirit through the early church. Last week, we saw last week the book of Acts often forces us to ask a question of our lives. And that question typically sounds something like, Is God calling me to go? I see these missionary journey's and these amazing stories of people coming to faith... Should I go? Is God calling me to go? But what we realize is that we're asking the wrong question. It's not IF we're called to go. The question is **Where is God calling me to go?** We are to live as a "Sent" people everywhere we go. That means our workplaces, neighborhoods, our city, and it also means to the ends of the earth. You're already called, but the question is where.

Today, we will be in Acts 15. Please turn there with me. We are going to look at some sent out people who have started a church and they are starting to run into some

problems. And as we start, I'd love to give you some context for where we are in this story. Up to this point in the church's very short history, nearly all of the people who have come to faith are ethnic Jews. Up until Acts 15, Gentiles (non-Jewish people) had only started to come to Jesus 10 years earlier. Which isn't a long time, but now there is a growing movement among the gentiles and God is using some missionaries named Paul and Barnabas to reach them in amazing ways, but a problem pops up at a church in Antioch. There was some theological confusion about what a person must do in order to be saved. But, their cultural differences were making it difficult for them to get onto the same page.

Now listen, this is chapter is a big deal! Get this picture in your head. We're in Antioch, we have this young church. And they are arguing over theology but they can't get seem to get on the same page. A huge church split was about to happen! We were about to have a Jewish Church and a Gentile Church instead of a unified multicultural church. And chapter 15 is going to show us how they solved this problem. Here is what we're going to see today... We're going to see that **"The gospel is worth fighting for."** This church didn't sit back and let this disagreement destroy the church. They fought for unity through the gospel! In today's passage were going to look at a church fight by prioritizing gospel theology and how the gospel's implications should impact our lives. This church held firm to the non-negotiables of the faith, but

were charitable & mutually submitted to each other in issues of preference. This is such a timely word for us as a church. We want to keep the gospel at the center of all we do at Mercy Church. But as you know, our vision is to see a gospel awakening in the city of Charlotte that is carried to the ends of the earth. If we're going to do that, we will need to be a unified church. A church willing to die to our individual preferences so that all of Charlotte and the world can come to know our beautiful savior! Amen?!

15 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.^[a]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."

1) The gospel is always disputed (vs. 1-6)

This was true then and it's true now. If you're new to church and that word gospel is unfamiliar to you. Let me explain briefly. The gospel is an announcement of good news to a bad news world. The bad news is that we are all sinners and we choose our own way. And because God is good and holy, our sin separates us from him. But, God because he is rich in mercy and because of the great love for us he became a man. Jesus, the son of God lived perfectly in our place and died in our place and rose from the dead for us, because we had no way making our way back to God. But God made a way for us. This beautiful savior came after you. You can't earn it, it's a gift to be received. The gospel is that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. So... in these first 6 verses, what we see is that there are some men confusing these new Gentile believers. They are telling them that salvation isn't received as a gift, it's has to be earned. These men believed that Jesus was the messiah, yes, they had that in common. But, they were confused and thought that everyone needed faith in Jesus, but also through circumcision. and in verse 5, when Paul and Barnabas got to Jerusalem to get council from the Apostles and elders, the same misunderstanding was there as well. Salvation wasn't a gift to be received, it's something to be earned through diligent obedience to OT laws.

Before we slam these Jewish Christians (circumcision party) for their misunderstanding. These laws were a big part of their cultural and historical identity. For thousands of years, the Jews were God's people. And in order to be set apart from other nations and to show the goodness of God, they were required to follow OT law. You can kind of break them down into two categories: 1) Cleanliness laws. 2) Sacrificial laws. Jesus' perfect life lived these laws out perfectly because the Jews were never able to do it.

The Gentiles, however, didn't follow these cleanliness laws. So, you put two and two together if you have one group of people trying to be clean and another that doesn't even have a framework for that, one group will be very concerned. It would have been impossible for these Jewish Christians to remain "clean" around gentiles who weren't concerned about that. That's what got these Jewish Christians concerned. They are afraid. And their fear led them to feel racially and culturally superior. You can imagine how frustrating that would have been for these Jews. Always worrying about cleanliness, and these Gentiles constantly frustrating their plans. That's not a good recipe for unity in God's church, right? So, we've got this theological problem with racial and cultural differences that's making it difficult to get on the same page.

We're not much different today, right? Just like this church, we all easily fall into the trap of feeling like we need to earn our salvation. That's what religion teaches right? Religion = I obey to be accepted. Gospel = I am accepted therefore I obey. Most of us are just like the circumcision party. Religion = I obey to be accepted... it produces fear and anxiety. God's always mad with me and I can't ever get his approval. So, we work and try to earn. It's also what leads to self-righteousness, anger, & pride towards others. We stick our noses up at people who aren't as good as we are. That's what religion produces. The gospel = I am accepted by God; therefore, I obey God because I love him. No other reason. I just love him. That produces joy & love for God and grace towards all types people. You see what's at stake here? The gospel is what's at stake with this church. And it's at stake for us too. We're not worried about OT laws per se, but were all bent toward trying to earn favor when we already have it in Christ. That's why Paul and Barnabas got into a dispute with them. There was too much to lose! And we can't afford to lose it either.

⁶The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷And 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. ⁸And 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."

2) The gospel must be defended (vs. 6-11)

What's so interesting to me about this passage is that this kind reminds us of the book of Galatians, right? Galatians was written right around the same time. And while Peter is the first one to speak up in the defense of the gospel and for these Gentiles, he wasn't always there.

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.^[a]¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified^[b] by works of the

law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:11-16)

Galatians, gives us a little more context for this argument that was going down. In Acts, we see Peter defending the gospel and the gentiles, but here, not so much. He started to be ashamed of his association with the gentiles...And look at how Paul rebuked Peter. Paul didn't come up to him and say, Peter, how dare you hold on to your racial superiority. Stop being racist Peter. He didn't do that. He could have. He pointed Peter to the gospel! That's what good friends do. They point you to the gospel. Because the gospel, in this situation, had implications on Peter's favoritism. Peter was being a hypocrite, and Paul called him back to proper Christian conduct, through the gospel. It's important to point out here that Paul's goal in defending the gospel was to bring his brother back to the truth of the gospel, where we find joy, peace, and unity. This is what Christian discipleship should look like. We point people to the gospel.

This is why the gospel must be defended because it's our hope for our future salvation, but it's also our hope for the here and now! You see, the gospel is not just the front door to the Christian house. It's the whole house. The gospel has far reaching implications on our everyday walk with Jesus. We never move past the gospel. The

gospel isn't the ABC's of the Christian faith that you move away from once you learn it. You go back to it every day because of its implications for our everyday life.

What do I mean by that? There are two major implications of the gospel: 1) Breadth of the gospel. 2) The depth of the gospel.

A) The gospel's implications are broad

The gospel was defended because it's implications are broad. Many people think that gospel is just the elementary stuff of the Christian faith. In fact, many think that the gospel is only for non-Christians to believe in, not for "mature" followers of Christ. With Peter, in Christ he knew that there was no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. God gave him a dream about it for crying out loud. But, that's the thing about us. Having right theology doesn't necessarily mean that you'll live rightly, right? Peter knew better, yet he lived contrary to the implications of the gospel.

Let me ask each individual some questions... Are the implications of the gospel affecting how you live? What about work, family, romance? Or what about your past? What about how you treat people who are made in the image of God, who are on the other side of the political isle or of a different cultural background? Let's imagine

this... Imagine Paul was standing in front of you... a scary thought. What would he say in regards you being out of step with the gospel in how you work? Is your value found in the dollars in your bank account? The gospel says you have been made spiritually rich in Christ? Why find your identity in money? What about family? Do you feel disowned for your faith in Christ? The gospel says that in Christ, the church is our new family. What about romance? The gospel says that your worth isn't in what others think of you, but in how Christ views you. How many of us are harboring unforgiveness? The gospel says that since we have been forgiven of much, we can forgive others. The breadth of the gospel means that it how we filter though our struggles in the here and now through all of life's various problems.

B) The gospel's implications are deep

The gospel was defended because it implications are deep. To illustrate this, while I was doing some research I heard of an article in the New York Times that was written about 5 years ago entitled "The enduring hunt for personal value."¹ Often times, when we walk in sin it is out of a search to feel valued and of worth. We want to matter. We hunt for personal value because we're afraid that we don't actually matter to others, or more honestly, to God. Again, with Peter, Paul could have shamed him for acting racist, but that's not what he did.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/business/dealbook/the-enduring-hunt-for-personal-value.html>

Peter didn't have a knowledge problem, he had heart problem. Sometimes in our hunt for value, we can look down on others. And in our society today, there are plenty of people who hunt for value by looking down on other classes, cultures, and races. Why? They will feel better about themselves if they do. That's basically what bully's do in middle school right. They feel insecure, so they have to put others down to build themselves up. They don't feel valued! Or hunting for value in romance, money, or status. You have to see what you're doing there. You're searching to justify your existence. You're looking for God, just not where he can be found. And as we see people doing this, if we respond to our friend walking in sin and all we say is "stop doing that". If we only rebuke them for their behavior you might shame them out of that behavior for a little while. But, their heart won't change. The gospel isn't achieved, its received. We need the gospel to travel from our heads down to our hearts to remind us that our value, is seen in the depths that Christ went to show you how valuable you are to him.

Again, this is what this the gospel being defended looks like. The gospel and its implications must be defended. It reminds me of Jude 1:20-23 ²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on those who

doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment^[a] stained by the flesh.

This is what Paul was doing with Peter. He was fighting for him to remember the glorious truth of the gospel.

Back to our story in Acts 15.

Peter just clarified that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles and that they shouldn't place a yoke of works around their necks. The gospel isn't Jesus plus works. He said that the gentiles are saved in the same way that Jews are, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

¹² 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. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 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 things¹⁸ known from
of old.'

¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble
those of the Gentiles who turn to God,

3) Gospel people show grace (vs. 12-21)

See what James did here. He used the scriptures to argue his point with these Jewish Christians. He didn't give them personal opinions on the matter. He used OT scriptures to help them see that it was God's plan to bring the Gentiles into the fold. He quoted Amos 9. In verse 15 he says that the word of the prophets agrees with what they are saying.

I love James' words here. I love his heart. My judgement is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God. We should not trouble them. We cannot put unnecessary rules upon them, that we don't even follow. Mercy Church, listen. We should be the safest place for lost people to turn. And like both the Jews and Gentiles, we all bring baggage with us when we come to know Jesus. We should not trouble new believers who come to know Jesus. If we're going to be a church that reaches this city, that means that we will be inheriting all sorts of problems. In premarital counseling, what you realize when you're getting married is that you're not just marrying the love of your life, you're also marrying all of

the baggage that they bring with them. Just like we do with our spouse, we show grace to them about their past. We should make it easy for the prodigal to come home. We should make someone turning to Jesus as easy for them as we can, because gospel people understand the decision they have made. A decision to follow Christ is a call to die to their old life and follow Christ. They need a gracious people to receive them when they make that decision.

We need to be a people that build bridges not walls trying to help people know Jesus. The church shouldn't make unnecessary demands of people to be part of the body. Now, assuredly, there is certainly a biblical standard for how a follow of Jesus should live. Jesus told the disciples to be Holy because he was Holy. But, gospel people remember who they used to be and can say, "yeah, I've been there too." Let me show grace for where they are now and help disciple them toward flourishing in Christ. Mercy, we shouldn't have a hint of self-righteousness among us!

Like this early church, Mercy is becoming more established now, and as we become more established we start to have needs. The more needs we have the easier it to focus on ourselves, than on the mission. This text reminds us that it's easy to drift from our mission to reach outsiders in order to make the insiders happy. It's a hard balance for a church. But, if we lose the impulse to

do anything to reach people, we will start to prioritize our preferences over what's good to reach and disciple people. And, if the entire focus of the church turns inward, it won't take long for that church to trouble outsiders with their own sets of rules of what it means to be a good Christian. For them it was circumcision for us, I don't know... real Christians live this way, or that way. They believe this, or that. They dress this way or that. And the standards that are set usually aren't bad in and of themselves. But with all of those rules it creates a culture of external conformity rather than internally transformational. Instead of focusing in showing grace and helping people see the gospel's transformational power, we end up giving people explicit or implicit rules that they must obey in order to be accepted. And because of our sinful nature, just like the church in this story, the majority culture usually ostracizes the minority culture at that church. They feel like they have to change their culture in order to be part of the church family. We have to fight against all of this!
Which leads us to point...

4) Gospel unity requires mutual submission (vs. 19-35)

I think it's healthy for us to expect God to give us the vision we hope to see. One of our core values as a church is that we expect God to change a life today. We try to walk around as if God will answer our prayers. Like, for

real... what if God answered our prayers? What if we saw an awakening? Would we be ready to receive the people God would send us? Because it would take a lot of self-sacrifice and mutual submission from all of us to reach our city. In order for us to reach our city and world it will take each one of us believing what Jesus said in John 17, that the world would know that he is real because of our love for each other.

Church, what if the Lord answered our prayers of being a multicultural church? As one of your pastors I ask that you pray that the Lord would give us some of the issues like we see here in Acts 15. I'd love to see people of all races and religious backgrounds flocking to Mercy. Hindu's, Buddhists, Muslim's, Sikh's, and the irreligious.

But, if God is going to do that, we need to be ready. We need to be ready to die to our preferences to see people come to Jesus and be disciplined in the Church. Let's look at how this looked for them in Acts 15:19. James made a ruling that they would require both the Jews and the Gentiles to make not small sacrifices, but major sacrifices in order to not cause their new brothers and sisters in the faith to stumble. James adopted a "whatever it takes attitude" to fight for unity in the church and he asked the gentiles to do the same.

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.

He's acknowledging that it's not just Gentiles that are going to be coming to faith, Jews will as well. So, we're going not going to make you obey OT law in order to follow Jesus. So, we ask that the gentiles Christians will be mindful and thoughtful of Jewish Christians and not cause them to stumble. And he gives them specific ways that gentiles believers can serve Jewish Christians. He asked both sides to think of the other person as more important than themselves.

So he writes the gentiles in Antioch a letter and sent it with Judas and Silas and it said, ²³“The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers^[c] who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you^[d] with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹that 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.”³⁰ So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

Y'all, only the Lord can bring this kind of unity! I guarantee you there were first century folks laughing at this situation and thinking to themselves that there was no way that these extremely different people would ever get on the same page. And they did! These people chose the gospel over their preferences. They chose their neighbor over themselves. And the result of this letter from James, they rejoiced! The Gentiles saw the enormous sacrifice the Jews were making for unity, and they were glad to mutually submit as well.

This is the kind of church, I want to be part of. One that keeps the gospel at the center of all we do. A church that doesn't trouble outsiders with rules and regulations. I want us to have great gospel theology and gospel culture. I want us to look like Jesus... He modeled this for us. He sacrifices his preferences to save us. The night before his death he looked up to his father and said, if it is possible, let this cup of wrath pass from me. But not my will but yours be done. Jesus submitted to the fathers will so that

all who call on his name could be saved. It's because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection, that we say that the gospel is worth fighting for! Only the gospel can save us. Only the gospel is our hope for glory and our hope for the here and now. And as a church we're going to have to fight like crazy to keep the gospel at the center and to live out its implications for the glory of God amongst all people! Amen.