

## Gospel Triumph: Stay Together – Acts 15:12-35

I don't know what the word "pleasant" conjures up in your mind. I tend to think of a relaxing morning with a cup of coffee in hand while I'm sitting outside enjoying a cool breeze. It's something easy-going and not in a rush or frantic. It's a different sensation than the word "fun". Fun is more active and requires more energy, but pleasant means a comfortable chair, good conversation, and a pervasive feeling that this is how things should be.

Listen to what David describes as pleasant in the Psalms. Psalm 133:1. Brothers dwelling together in unity is pleasant to David. It's relaxing. This is how it should be. There's something peaceful and comfortable about it.

But here's the thing about the pleasantness of unity, we often must work for it. Life is filled with disruptions and challenges to walking together and working together. But unity is worth the fight because unity is built on grace.

Last week we started studying Acts 15 and what is known as the Jerusalem Council. In the story of Acts, the last 5 chapters, taking up around 10 years, have seen the Gospel go to Gentiles, which has been an amazing thing. But now you have an incredibly diverse group gathered into the church, and disruptions and challenges inevitably confront the pleasant unity believers are striving for. Look back at 15:1-2. You can see the disagreement and debate, but you can see that there's an instant desire for clarity and unity, which is why the church at Antioch sends a delegation to Jerusalem.

Last week we saw Peter stand up and clearly emphasize the message of grace as the core of the Gospel. That is the main issue for the Jerusalem Council. But as the council lays out the simplicity and truth of the Gospel for all believers, there's a genuine coming together in unity that is beautiful to watch. We learn from this passage how to maintain unity and deal with friction among believers. Unity does not always involve meeting in the middle. Unity must be built on the Gospel of Grace and when we are committed to grace, the peaceful pleasantness of unity will be the result, and God will be honored and glorified by His people. So, here's

what we will see today in Acts 15:12-35. **3 Keys to Unity when Friction Challenges the Church.**

### **1. Revel in God's Purpose (vv. 12-18)**

Last week we finished in verse 11 where Peter gets to the heart of the issue before the Council. Look there. Notice the reaction of the entire council. Verse 12. Peter's focus on grace and faith stops the debate. At this point Paul and Barnabas, who are coming from Antioch, share their experiences with the Gentiles.

They had already reported on their 3-year journey through Cyprus and Asia Minor to the Apostles and other leaders. Look back to verse 4. But now they stand and speak specifically of the signs and wonders God did during their trip. Why the focus on signs and wonders? Well, remember the purpose of these miracles throughout Acts. They accompany the proclamation of the Gospel and confirm that the message is from God. This also would have connected this moment to the Exodus and God's establishment of Israel as His chosen people. Why? Because of the signs and wonders done there as well. In other words, the signs and wonders indicate that God is doing something special to establish his new people here as the Gentiles are saved by faith.

But there's only a minimal emphasis in the text on Paul and Barnabas here because of who stands up next. Look at verse 13. This is James, the brother of Jesus, who had become the clear leader in the church in Jerusalem at this point. James is going to bring the whole debate to a conclusion here. Look at verse 14.

Notice the way James describes God's salvation of the Gentiles. He "visited" them to take a people for His name. This language is taken from the OT where God visits Israel to take them as a people for His name. James had passages like Exodus 19:4-6 and Deuteronomy 7:6 in mind. James is indicating that God has now chosen the Gentiles out from the nations to be His special covenant people through faith. Peter has testified to this, and the OT backs it up.

Notice how James seeks to bring unity through Scripture and defends the gospel of grace to the Gentiles through Scripture as well. Look at verses 15-18.

James is largely quoting Amos 9:11-12, but there are a couple of phrases taken from other OT texts, which is why he says “the prophets” agree. What’s the point? God promised in the OT prophets to restore the house of David from the ruins. When David’s house is restored, this will result in Gentiles seeking the Lord and being called by His name to be His people.

James quotes this passage because he believes David’s house has been restored through the resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Jesus of Nazareth, as recounted in the Gospels and Acts. James sees the Prophets as expecting that after David’s house is restored that the Gentiles will come to the Lord.

But I want you to notice the emphasis in James’s short speech on God’s purpose in all of this. Look back to verse 14 and then at verse 17. God’s goal is to call a people for his name. Just like Peter, James emphasizes God’s initiative and God’s call.

Last week we talked a lot about grace as the crucial thing in God’s work and our salvation. But we talked about grace more as it relates to you as an individual, which is perfectly legitimate and what Peter was getting at in verse 11. But now James remains focused on God’s unmerited grace, but now it’s about an entire group of people who are all called by God to become His. Look around this room. God’s grace has moved in the lives of all sorts of people. None of us deserves it, but God has saved you, and you, and you and joined us together to be a people who represent Him. God is doing something through the church that is monumental and massive and we, by grace, get to be a part of it.

When God chooses a people for his name, He is associating them with Him. Think of God, think of His people and vice versa. These people are meant to reflect on God and bring Him glory by their existence and way of life. This has always been God’s purpose, even from the garden of Eden. A people called by Him to represent Him and glorify Him. It’s this purpose that we must unify ourselves around. And a key element in that unity is our second point.

## **2. Regard the Change Grace Brings (vv. 19-29)**

James isn’t done speaking yet. Now he’s going to draw a conclusion based on the teaching of the OT and God’s purpose through grace. Look at verse 19. Because

God's purpose has been to restore the kingdom of David through Jesus and to bring Gentiles to Himself, James believes they shouldn't burden those Gentiles by confusing the gospel. But he doesn't finish there. Look at verse 20. So, what is going on here with these instructions? Let's make a couple of things clear.

James is not telling the Gentiles that instead of circumcision these are the requirements they need to be saved. He's not adding clutter to the Gospel here. So, what is he doing with these four requirements? Some people say that what James is doing here is making suggestions to the Gentiles to avoid certain things because they will be going to church with Jews. In other words, Jews have certain strict sensibilities because of the OT law, and so you should avoid participating in activities that may bring offense to them and cause disunity in the church. The problem with that is that later in the formal letter to the Gentiles the Apostles use the word "requirements" for these same 4 activities. Look at verse 28. Notice too that James wants them to avoid sexual immorality. This is hardly a non-essential Jewish custom. It's a vital issue of holiness for believers.

So, if James isn't primarily trying to navigate Jewish and Gentile relationships here, what is he doing? All four of these requirements have to do with participation in idol worship in the broader culture and especially in pagan temples. Idolatry was wrapped up in almost every part of life. From political and civic engagement to business to family life to neighborhood relationships. We tend to compartmentalize religion in our time. Religion in this box, everything else in separate boxes, but that simply wasn't the case for people in the Roman Empire. So, what is James commanding the Gentiles? Cut off all idolatry and participation in idolatrous ways. To make this simple, in verse 19 he says that Gentiles don't have to live like Jews and in verse 20 he says that they can't live like pagans. So, what does he mean in verse 21?

I think James is trying to help the Gentiles here because he knows that many of them are still worshiping Jesus in synagogues and with Jews. This verse continues the line of thought of both verses 19 and 20. He's saying something like, "Moses is read everywhere, so don't heap burdens on the Gentiles and be clear that they don't need to keep the law" and he's saying, but they can't live like pagans.

James's defense of God's purposes and his instruction here becomes the basis for a letter sent to the Gentile churches. Let's read verses 23-29. They emphasize the unity they have and the requirements for the Gentiles to avoid pagan lifestyles.

For unity to truly grow requires us to regard the change that grace brings. The Gentiles simply couldn't continue to live as they used to. The culture could no longer control them, and they couldn't participate in many of the same activities as they used to. This was a massive change for them, but a change that grace brings about. One author put it this way: *"Faith in Jesus without faithfulness to his teaching is not faith at all."* – Brian Vickers

The freedom of grace motivates us to pursue holiness. It's not a license to sin and then assume forgiveness will be there. The starting point has changed. Galatians 5:13-14. Freedom in grace promotes unity in relationships and this brings us to our last point this morning.

### **3. Rejoice in Unity (vv. 30-35)**

Paul and Barnabas are sent off with the letter from the Apostles and the Council at Jerusalem. Look at verse 30. The teachers who had come from Judea had no doubt tried to influence the entire church in Antioch and so they read the response from Jerusalem to the entire church. Big Deal. Look at verses 31 and 32. Lots of encouragement happening here. Why? Two things. First, they are clearly encouraged that the Gospel remains the gospel they had trusted in and circumcision and keeping the law hasn't been added to it. Second, they are built up by the unity within the body of Christ they are experiencing. Look at verses 33 and 35.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity. It's a glorious thing when Christ's church faces friction and even challenges to the gospel and comes out unified and encouraged by the truth and the fellowship of believers. Ultimately our unity comes from a shared understanding of grace. So let's follow the example of the early church and tenaciously commit ourselves to grace and to one another. Let's pray.