

The Essentials

Scripture Reading — Acts 15:5-21

5Then 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." 6The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10Now 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? 11No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." 12The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. 13When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. 14Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 15The 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, 17that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18that have been known for ages. 19"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20Instead 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. 21For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." —

"We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." Acts 15:19

If you've ever seen the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you'll recall that Toula Portokalos, a single woman, laments her boring life and the confines of her culture: "Greek girls are expected to marry Greek boys, have Greek babies, and feed everyone until the day we die!" What makes the movie so enjoyable is its comic situations that apply in many cultures.

Cultural traditions and practices also get addressed in Acts 15, but the conflicts and struggles here aren't funny. The burning question here is Do people who become Christians also need to become Jewish to be saved? Today we might rephrase the question along these lines: Do people need to become just like us in order to hear the gospel and be accepted into the church? The Bible states clearly that the answer to this question is "No!"

If we focus on the rules and traditions of our church rather than on faith in Christ alone, we miss the main point and can get caught up in legalism. On the other hand, if we focus only on ourselves and our own relationship with Christ, we can lose sight of the community of faith and get caught up in individualism. While we all bring something important to the community, we remember that the community, the body of Christ, also has much to offer us. So let's serve Christ together as his people, as the Spirit enables us (1 Corinthians 12).

Prayer

Lord, thank you for welcoming all kinds of people through your generous grace and love. Thank you for enriching your church and guiding us to grow together. In Christ, Amen.

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Printed on June 18, 2019