

Part 27: The Clarity of Gospel Application

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“The Milky Way Galaxy is huge.” That is a true statement. Those five words are easy to understand, we know all of them. It’s actually their simplicity that can be a hindrance. It’s easy to affirm that. I’m sure it is huge. Who would argue the fact?

But do you know how huge? Well, the fastest military jet in the world travels at 1,900 miles per hour. That means it would be able to cross the entirety of the United States in less than an hour and a half. If that jet were to fly to Mercury, which is the closet planet to Earth in the Milky Way—it would take 25,000 hours. Which is equivalent to flying nonstop for just about three years.

That’s why scientists have to gauge distance by using “light-years.” To use any human means of traveling speed to communicate the distance is to use numbers too big to be helpful. Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. So, while our fastest jet can make it across the country in 90 minutes at 1,900 miles per hour—you could cross the entire United States 66 times, in one second at light speed. Or, to put it another way, if you were to travel at light speed for one minute, you would circle the entire globe 450 times.

Now, in case you haven’t figured it out yet—a light year, is traveling at light speed for an entire year. If you were to travel to the edge of our solar system, it would take you 1.87 light years. But our solar system is only one solar system which makes up the Milky Way galaxy. If you wanted to get from one end of our galaxy to another you would have to travel at the speed of light, non-stop, for 100,000 years.

The Milky Way Galaxy is huge. But those five words, true as they are, don’t do it justice.

We’ve been in Acts 15 studying what is called “The Jerusalem Council.” The Council was a meeting of two churches and their respective leaders to fight for clarity as the church grew in size and diversity. It sought to answer one big question: “How is one saved?” Some of the Jewish Christians argued that salvation was one part faith in Jesus and one part obedience to the Old Testament law of circumcision. Peter, Paul and the other Apostles argued that salvation was by faith in Christ alone.

Last week we saw their conclusion. After hearing Peter, Paul and Barnabas, James opened up the Old Testament itself—Amos 9 in specific—and concluded that those Gentiles who come to faith in Jesus are saved. In **Acts 15:19**, he says this “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.”

Those who turn to Jesus should not be troubled to do more to be saved. Why? Well, we can summarize Peter’s statement in Acts 15:11 this way: “Salvation, by grace through faith.” That’s the true statement of scripture. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ Jesus alone. Five words, but what we just saw is that simple words are sometimes all too easy to pass over.

And if we pass over the weight and clarity of those five simple words, “Salvation, by grace through faith” this passage won’t make any sense to us. Because look at what James says immediately after he affirms that statement: **Acts 15:20-21** “But [we] should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by

idol, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

What’s going on? So the Gentiles aren’t saved by Jesus plus circumcision—but they are saved by Jesus plus four other laws? Or are there two standards for salvation: The Jews have to live to one standard, the Gentiles by another standard?

This text presents a series of problems for us today as well. Are the biblical authors conflicted and confused? Are biblical commands relative? We don’t have any problem boasting in Christ alone as we eat a rare T-bone steak—so can we boast in Christ alone when we live sexually immoral lives?

But when we fix our eyes on those five words: “Salvation, by grace through faith.” We see how the immense weight of that one statement shapes everything in this text—but more importantly we will see how this shapes everything in your life ranging from how you view your acceptance before God and how you share the gospel with others.

Our main point to day is this: **Clarity of the gospel message brings clarity for gospel messengers.**

There should be no such thing as prideful astrophysicist. Staring into the depths of space should create a realistic size of our own life. So too, when we stare into the depths of our salvation by grace through faith—everything else false into proper perspective. Last week we fought for the doctrines of faith alone, in Christ alone—but today we see what it looks like to orient our lives around the glory of God alone.

I’m going to work through this text a little differently than I normally would because we can only understand it best when we view it as a whole. But if I were to give you an outline of the text this morning, what we have in verses 12-21 is the summary position of the Apostles and the Old Testament and it concludes with James’ recommendation. Then in verses 22-29, we see the agreement the whole council came to and the letter they wrote to send back to the church in Antioch. Then lastly in verses 30-35 we see the receipt and response of the letter and its messengers in the Antioch church.

But to help us see that today, I’m going to work through the text in three ways. First, I want to address **The Potential Confusion** in this text. Second, I want to address **The Commands** given in the text, and lastly we will draw some points of application as we **Address the Christian** today.

Let’s begin by **Addressing the Confusion** there might be in this text. Larry David once said that “A good compromise is when everyone is disappointed.” And is that what happened here? The Jews who insisted on circumcision are told to no longer insist on it. The Gentiles who were under the impression they were freed from the law had one law removed, and four more added. Was the gospel clarified only to be compromised?

As we examine this potential confusion what we see instead is the **Joy of Clarity**.

When we read the Bible, don’t forget how to read. Before James and the others issue the commands in this text—the matter had already been settled. Peter said so, “God cleanses the heart of the Gentiles by faith” (vs. 9), Paul and Barnabas affirmed the divine signs which accompanied the salvation of the Gentiles by faith alone (vs. 12). James uses Amos 9 to show that this salvation of the lost by faith was the prophetic proof that God had “visited” his people by calling them to his own name from every

nation. And then James for added clarity said in verse 19—we should not any longer trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.

What's clear before we get to the letter—is that the answer had been given. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

That's why the church in Antioch is not disappointed when they heard this message. Did you notice that? Look at **Acts 15:30-31**, "So when they were sent off they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement." Moreover, look at how things ended in **Acts 15:35**, "But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also."

Why did the Antioch Christians receive this letter which called them to obey four new commands with such encouragement? Because the commands were not connected with their salvation. They were the fruit of it. This was so clear that by the end of the party in Antioch it was the message of the gospel, the word of the Lord, that was being more fervently and more clearly proclaimed. There was no confusion here.

I wonder do you have that kind of clarity on salvation? It's precisely in matters of obedience and salvation that we often become so confused and disheartened. I remember sharing the gospel with a football player at the University once, and when I had finished I asked him what he thought he needed to do to become a Christian. He said, "I need to try to live a life that glorifies God."

I realized my gospel message was not clear enough. I am all for living a life that glorifies God—that's precisely what this text is about. But we are not saved by our works. We are not saved by living for God's glory—we are made alive by faith for God's glory. God is most glorified by bringing dead hearts to life by faith—not a result of work so that any may boast for it is the gift of God.

But, as many of you memorized this week in **Ephesians 2:10**, we are saved not by our own works we are *his* workmanship, created in Christ Jesus—for what purpose—for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Does the gospel call us to works of obedience? Yes! But are we saved by acts of obedience? No. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and his perfect obedience. Obedience is like the water that flows from the spring of faith.

The Antioch church saw this message as a joy worth celebrating because the good news of faith in Jesus Christ had been clarified.

But notice how it was received by the Jewish majority as well. If you're like me, you love a good debate. But there's nothing worse, and nothing harder to concede, than losing a debate. The circumcision party lost the debate. But look at their response to losing: verse 22 says, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church...", verse 25 says, "it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord," verse 28 says, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements."

Notice what humility the gospel gives us! These men wanted to be right by God more than they wanted to be right themselves! After the debate we read three times that this decision of faith alone "seemed good to them."

When God is the sole source of our salvation he also becomes the sole source of our authority. You show me a salvation without authority—and I'll show you no salvation at all. These men were confused on how God saved—but they were united in their understanding that God himself was the authority.

So they allowed themselves, with reason and pushback, to submit themselves to God's correction through his word, and among his people. One of the unique hallmarks of Christianity is that we are most right when we are proven the most wrong. When we let God's word define our sinful hearts—we can be made right by grace through faith in Jesus. When we let God's word, define our doctrine, we can joyfully accept correction when after faithful study and conversation, our thoughts on God and godliness don't match up with God's thoughts on the matter.

When the gospel is clear, the correction and the command of God become joyful as well.

But what of these four specific commands? Well, here I want to take a brief aside. This is our second point: **Addressing the Commands**.

Let's look at the two passages where these are outlined: **Acts 15:20**, "[they should] abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood." The letter written to the believers says, **Acts 15:28-29**, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these things, you will do well."

Now, I'm going to ask you to think a little more deeply with me on this point because this is an extremely important passage in our world today. It's from these verses that some still hold to two distinct forms of legalism. The first is Christian legalism, "You must do these thing to be saved." I heard of one Christian who was chastised by another Christian for eating rare meat because, "It had blood in it."

The second is cultural legalism. When I say, "cultural legalism," I'm describing what is more often called, "liberalism" or "anti-nomianism." This group of individuals looks at biblical commands like these four and says, "Food sacrificed to idols was obviously a culture thing we don't have to worry about today. Kosher food laws are no longer needed because the law was fulfilled—dietary laws are now culturally outdated. So too then, are issues of sexual immorality culturally outdated."

The word used for sexual immorality is the broadest word they could have used and it was understood to mean anything sexual outside of intimacy between one man and one woman in marriage. The cultural legalist says, "You only need to obey the laws of cultural popularity at the time." So many would say you can have sex with whomever or whatever you'd like as long as it's loving.

In light of both of these problems, how are we to understand these commands? How these apply to this specific circumstance in scripture is something I'll address in our last point. But for right now I want to address how these commands apply to scripture as a whole.

All of these commandments can be found in Leviticus 17 and 18. But the most important question we have to answer first is, "Are we under the law?" This has already been answered. No. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and Jesus himself fulfilled the law. He alone perfectly met God's standards for devotion and distinction.

This easily applies to the first three commands. In the resurrection, Jesus showed that the only living God is our God. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 8:4**, “Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’”

Moreover the issues of how animals were killed and blood had to do with the temple sacrifices. God cared about how the animals were killed and the blood of the animal was reserved for altar of sacrifice. Where other pagan religions did weird things with blood, the Israelites offered blood to God alone because they knew their sin demanded death. But Jesus was the final sacrifice—his blood alone was sufficient for all who come to God by faith. Therefore we don’t need to keep sacrificial or dietary laws. When Jesus fulfilled the law—he fulfilled all of it.

But this brings us to that last command. If Jesus fulfilled the law, and if sexual immorality is part of the law? Are we free to engage in it? No.

Why? For three quick reasons. The first is that sexual purity was defined and commanded before the law was given. Sex between one man and one woman was a creation ordinance—it is a human law. I don’t need to go into the anatomy of males and females to prove compatibility, and I don’t need to play infomercials on STD treatment to prove exclusivity. Those common graces prove God’s unique design.

Second, Jesus himself commands that we avoid sexual immorality—despite the fulfillment of the law—and so do the New Testament authors.

Third, just because the law is fulfilled by Jesus by the letter and for salvation—it doesn’t mean that the law is not a helpful guide for wise living. While there is one living God, ought we to be wise and careful when we preach Christ among the Muslims? While there is no need for sacrifices today, does God care at all how he is worshipped in the church or by the Christian? While the holiness of the law is fulfilled in Jesus, doesn’t Jesus save us so that we can live free from sin and pursue holiness and union with him?

So now we have clarity on the commands on their own...but it raises more questions when we consider them in context don’t we?

Are the Gentile Christians free from the law? Yes! So why are they commanded to abide by some of them? Yes! Are the Gentile Christians already convinced by the teaching of scripture that they ought to avoid sexual immorality? Yes! But why then is it reiterated?

This leads us to our last point this morning: **Addressing the Christian:** and what we see here is the clarity of **a life of liberty.**

Here is the application of the wonderful good news of salvation. They have been set free by grace through faith in Jesus. Yet these commandments were no burden to them. They rejoiced at their receipt of them.

Don’t you want that kind of joy? We love liberty in America. We believe that God has given us inalienable rights such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But often times both politics and religion can find themselves enslaved to freedom.

Freedom politically is a good thing, and it’s a thing that should be defended when appropriate. But Peter rightly warns us when: **1 Peter 2:16**, “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

We are free from the law. But we are servants of God. Christian freedom isn't absolute freedom. It's not the freedom to do whatever, wherever, always at 100% of your own choosing. Christian freedom is the freedom from slavery to sin, slavery to self and slavery to culture so that we can freely live as servants of God in any context.

And what is the context that these Gentile Christians are finding themselves in? Well, at this point the Christian church is meeting in Jewish synagogues. While the Old Testament is read, the Christians rejoice at the prophetic message of Christ alongside unbelieving Jews who don't yet see Jesus as the messiah. This coexistence gets increasingly complicated and ends up with Christians being expelled from the synagogues.

But for right now they are coming and worshipping alongside unsaved Jews and these commands are given for the sake of their Christian witness. That's what James points out in **Acts 15:21**, "For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the Synagogue."

Because they stared into the depth of "salvation by grace through faith," they stood in awe of the God who saved them and they were willing to give up any freedom they might otherwise have in the gospel so that others might be set free by the gospel.

The Christian message is offensive. While Christianity is not legalistic or antinomian, nor democrat nor republican, neither white nor brown, slave nor free, it is not neutral. If our Christian witness is dependent upon you not offending anyone then you'll never share the gospel. The gospel is offensive, it says to someone that they are wrong, they have wronged God, and apart from their faith and repentance they will spend a justified eternity in hell. That offends.

But because the gospel offends, and because the gospel alone saves, Christians ought to make sure that it is the message, not the messengers who offend.

Notice the lack of "Don't Tread On Me Flags," in Antioch. But also notice how none of them adopt the Jewish way of thinking. The clarity of the gospel allowed them to give up certain rights afforded to them so that those who were lost might see and hear the gospel more clearly.

Here we see the joy of Christian liberty! Love does not insist on its own way—love insists on Christ!

You might be free to drink, free to watch that movie, free to make that joke—but is your freedom in Christ really an excuse to live freely for yourself? When the gospel is clear we live for the glory of God and the love for the lost.

We can ask ourselves first—"does this most glorify God?" because I have been freed not to glorify or please myself—but to be most pleased when God is most glorified. Second we can ask, "Does this help me love others, does it help make the gospel more clear to others, or does it muddy the gospel to others?"

But because we have Jesus, because we have the good news of salvation from our own sins, we know the joy of freedom in Christ. My brother meat eaters, can you say with Paul, **1 Corinthians 8:13**, "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."

Sometimes we would think we would gladly lay down our lives for the lost—but would you lay down your Sunday lunch out? What if the businesses around us saw so little Christians on Sundays that they closed up shop? I can't tell you how many times I've shared the gospel and invited someone to church only to have them say, "I work on Sundays!"

Have you considered where your freedom might hinder the free message of salvation by grace through faith from going out?

Have you considered how your internal fight against sexual sin and temptation is a witness to the God who deeply satisfies us with his love and loving labors in us for purity?

Might we stare into the depth of what is ours by grace through faith so that we can turn to our witness in the world and present the sole source of comfort and salvation that is in Christ and Christ alone.

Might we say with Paul, **Philippians 3:7-8**, "Whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

Brothers and sisters, by faith you may gain Christ. And having freedom in Christ—will you live freely for Christ? Will you consider the glory of God and the salvation of the lost as worthy of all our efforts—not because we must be saved—but because we are saved and we desire others to be as well?