

The letter to the gentile believers and God's law

Littlebourne - 4th June 2023 - Acts 15:22-35

We pick up the story again at the end of the first council of the church. Last time we heard that some people had travelled from Judea to Antioch and brought with them the teaching that circumcision was required for salvation. Paul and Barnabas opposed them, and then to settle the question finally, they travel to Jerusalem to get the verdict of the apostles and elders there.

The first council of the church then happens - the leadership of the church in Jerusalem meet together and discuss the matter and come to the conclusion that circumcision was certainly not required, and that salvation is by grace. However, they also decide it worthwhile to send some few instructions to the gentile believers at Antioch.

Now, the matter having been concluded, Paul and Barnabas can return to Antioch to take with them the verdict reached.

v22

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,

Paul and Barnabas, who have come from Antioch to seek advice, are now returning, but with help.

Two people are mentioned that go with them. First, Judas called Barsabbas. We don't hear of this Judas again, but he may be, based on the name, the brother of 'Joseph also called Barsabbas', who got a mention in chapter 1. When the apostles were deciding on a new twelfth member, they narrow it down to Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. Joseph doesn't get picked, but he must have been a strong contender, and we never hear of him again

(though we never hear of Matthias either). Barsabbas means 'son of' sabbas, so maybe Judas is Joseph's brother.

The other man mentioned is Silas. Now we hear about Silas much more in the coming chapters, as he sticks around in Antioch and joins Paul on his second missionary journey around the Mediterranean.

I think it's likely that the church in Jerusalem decided to send some of their own to reinforce the message that Paul and Barnabas returned with, and to make it clear that the church in Jerusalem stands with the church in Antioch. There should be no possibility that those that provoked the debate in Antioch can say that it's just Paul and Barnabas bringing their own opinions home. Remember, it's a long way and there's no easy means of communication between the congregations in these cities - all contact, even letters, is by someone travelling, likely on foot.

v23

23 with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

The council sends these men off with a letter to the gentiles in the Antioch area.

Syria is roughly the area south of Antioch, and Cilicia is the region to the north, so this letter is to the gentile believers not only at the city of Antioch, but the whole surrounding area.

The letter starts with who it's from - from the brothers in Jerusalem, including the apostles and elders of the church there. And it's addressed to the gentile brothers. It looks like from the start, the writers of the letter want to make clear they are writing as much more like equals than as from a special position of privilege. The church in Jerusalem isn't a special case, with extra authority. They're all brothers, and they wish to be in agreement, as it says in verse 25 'having come to one accord'.

v24-27

24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name

of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

Next, they address the issue at hand. People have come from Judea, from the Jerusalem area, and brought bad theology with them. They admit this happened, and assure the church in Antioch that this was not their doing.

Then they explain what they have done about this - they have come to a conclusion about the matter, unanimously, and have sent back Paul and Barnabas, and Judas and Silas, to relay their message. They also put in writing their support for Paul and Barnabas.

The letter and the testimony of the men goes back to Antioch to settle things.

v28-29

28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that 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.”

Now the meat of the letter - what's the conclusion to the debate about this? First they make clear that both the Holy Spirit and themselves agree on the matter, and then explain what they think is required.

Curiously, the initial point of discussion is sort of skipped over - circumcision is not actually mentioned, though the implication is that it's absence in the list of requirements means it's not required. But they do mention those four things that James mentioned in the previous part of the chapter.

This is where it's maybe confusing, so I'd like to return to this later.

v30

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had

sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

This letter goes with them to Antioch and it seems that it was read out to the whole congregation who have gathered together to hear them, and sounds like they were pleased to hear it.

Judas and Silas also are of great help - they're said to be prophets, bringing God's word to the people there. Then they return to Jerusalem - except Silas doesn't. Notice that verse 34 is missing. This is because some manuscripts include a verse 34 saying that Silas stayed in Antioch.

We know Silas stayed behind, because the next section (v40) tells us that Paul and him set off northwards on Paul's second missionary journey together. So verse 34, probably not original, hence its omission in modern translations, but true nonetheless. Maybe some scribes wanted to make it a little more clear that Silas stayed in Antioch, rather than returned to Jerusalem with Judas.

Paul and Barnabas continue to minister in Antioch, until we see next week they go off again on long journeys.

Law

The issue at the heart of things in this is the matter of God's law. I'm sure those proponents of circumcision were saying 'well God said to do it'. They would have said this was a law that God put in place. The difficulty is that they're right on that point - God really did command His people to be circumcised on the 8th day as a sign of the covenant He had with them. And yet, as we read in Paul's letter to the Galatians, we hear about how circumcision is of no value and God doesn't require it. What's going on?

Theologians divide up God's law into three categories, three types of law, to help explain what is going on.

First, there is the moral law - think the ten commandments, or Jesus' summing up of the whole law as 'love God and love your neighbour'. This is the unchanging moral law of God that applies at all times and all places.

Second, the civil or judicial law - think about the laws around leprosy, or the laws about dangerous animals, or how to conduct trials or punish criminals. Really these are the moral law expounded upon and applied to that day and age. These laws that we read about in the Old Testament were written to Old Testament Israel. Do they still apply to us? Yes and no. I think they do apply, but we should apply the principle, not the specifics - we should take it like case law.

To give an example, there's a law in Deuteronomy 22:8:

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.

My house doesn't have a parapet around the roof, this chapel doesn't, so are we disobeying God's law? I think the idea is to apply the principle today, not the specifics. Houses back then had flat roofs used often by people, but we don't have that really. How this applies to us is more to balconies and mezzanines - we would be violating God's law if we didn't have a railing up there on the balcony. So the principles apply, and sometimes it's more obvious as in this case (I did pick a more obvious example), sometimes it's much harder to interpret.

Third, there is the ceremonial law - think circumcision, sacrifices in the temple, cleansing and priests and that sort of thing. These laws are about being holy and about worshipping God rightly. Do these still apply? Again, yes and no. The requirement to be holy still applies, the requirement for sacrifice to be made to atone for sin still applies, but the method by which these laws are followed is different.

Today (and actually back then too, though they may not have realised it), rather than our own actions being what makes us holy, Christ's actions make us holy. Rather than our sacrifices atoning for sin, Christ's final sacrifice has atoned for all our sin. Rather than having an earthly temple and priests as intermediaries with God, we have a great high priest in Jesus, who acts as the mediator between God and man.

So again, the underlying principles of the ceremonial law still apply - be holy, sinners can't approach God directly, atone for sin by sacrifices, etc. But Christ Jesus fulfils the law - He obeys in our place, He makes us holy, He intercedes for us. The ceremonial specifics were pointing forward to their fulfilment in Christ.

Some laws we read about in the Bible fit neatly into one of these categories, and some are harder to classify. There are differing opinions on how some of the aspects of the old testament law apply today.

The letter's commands

Circumcision is one of these laws that we find applies differently today - no longer do we require this outward sign of being part of God's covenant people, of being separate. Peter makes clear in verse 8 that the gentiles, the uncircumcised ones, were clearly part of God's people as they had received the Holy Spirit. Circumcision is also sacrificial, it's a bloody rite, that is no longer required because we have the complete sacrifice of Christ.

Continuing to practice it shows failure to understand what Christ has done.

But the letter contains not just the implication that circumcision is not required, but that the gentile believers should consider following these four other rules mentioned. Abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from eating blood, from eating what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

Now one of these is easier to categorise - sexual immorality goes in the 'moral law' category, so that's easy to explain. It applies then, now and always in much the same way. The letter doesn't explore what sexual immorality the apostles might have had in mind, or might have needed to address, but we can see it's a moral issue. However, the other items are harder to explain. What category do these food issues fit into?

In the ancient world, some of the meat produced was offered to idols. Slaughtered meat would be brought before the deities in pagan temples, and offered. But those idols, those false gods, of course can't eat. So the meat would be sold instead. (Unlike the true God, who could consume up offerings to Him in fire, as we see in the Old Testament a couple of times, idols really couldn't.)

Jews at the time would refuse to buy such food, considering it tainted from being used in pagan worship. So Jews wouldn't go near this sort of thing, they thought it unclean. It sound pretty reasonable, but the trouble is that Paul later writes about this topic and seems to come to a slightly different conclusion than this letter.

Paul's view in 1 Corinthians 8, on this very subject, is that this topic is 'Adiaphora'. That's a Greek word for 'indifferent'. The idea is that this in itself is not something that is morally one way or the other, it's got no moral significance. Paul says:

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."

8 Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

Paul is saying that the meat is no different whether it's been used previously in a pagan worship service to a god that doesn't exist or whether it hasn't. It's a non-issue for him.

Participating in the offering of meat to idols, being part of the service where that happens, would clearly be sin. Eating meat you bought at the market that was in no way involved in anything like that would clearly not be sin. But the grey area - the buying of meat that was used in that way, that's where the disagreement rests and where Paul says he's OK with it.

But he does also recognise that others disagree and do find it troubling to eat meat that has been offered to idols:

7 However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

9 But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? 11 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. 12 Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

So whilst this is an issue of no significance for Paul - he's happy to buy meat at the market whatever it was used for - Paul recognises that he is not being helpful to others if this is something they care about. But Paul also doesn't allow for these things to become too important - it's fine to follow customs to get along, but don't elevate them to requirements.

Today, meat offered to idols is not something we ever think about. But there are plenty of issues that are 'Adiaphora', morally insignificant, but still things we need to decide about and come to conclusions on. What to wear, what musical style we pick on Sundays, what Bible translation is best for us might be more pressing issues in the church today.

A saying used to sum up this sort of thing is "in necessary things unity; in uncertain things liberty; in all things charity". This is the sort of thing to aim for.

The instructions for abstaining from certain foodstuffs I think was a call for unity - the gentiles and the Jews to get along on a topic that they couldn't see eye to eye on. Paul later explains, and no doubt explained to his home church in Antioch too, that this is not a moral failing, but an issue of unity and fellowship. Customs and habits are hard to get away from, and the Jewish believers wouldn't have been able to just change their habits overnight. Similarly, gentiles would have had customs and habits that were ingrained, so I think that the idea of these things that the letter includes to the gentiles are a nudge in the direction of unity between Jewish and gentile believers. Yes, the word requirements is there, but they also make clear this is a burden, and one that they don't want to lay any more of than they can.

Gospel

To conclude, the law of God applies today. Some laws apply differently than how they did thousands of years ago in ancient Israel, some are much the same. But the law of God endures.

The law of God reveals to us the black and white reality of how we match up against it. Our temptation is to obsess about the fine details of the grey areas, the adiaphora. It's comforting to us to know there are some areas of disagreement, where we have liberty to do what we feel is right.

But if we look at God's moral law - the command to put God in top position in our lives, to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength - the black and white commandments that pull no punches, we realise that we don't come close to following God's law. Our arguments about how to apply the civil law of Leviticus to today is pointless if we haven't got an answer for the moral law that we transgress every minute of every day. We need perspective, we need to see what really matters.

I mentioned that Jesus fulfils the ceremonial aspects of the law - He is the priest, the temple, the sacrifice that bring us into communion with God. Jesus also fulfils for us the moral law, in the sense that He has obeyed on our behalf. In our union with Him, we are counted righteous because of His obedience and His righteousness. Our sins have been paid for and Christ's perfect obedience takes their place. Only in Christ can the law of God be a blessing to us and not a curse.