

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Nineteen
Acts 15:13-41

Day One

13 When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

v. 13 – Most believe that this James is the natural brother of Jesus. Having been raised Catholic, we never even considered that Jesus had brothers or sisters, but he did:

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him (Matthew 13:54-57).

When Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to many, including his brother, James:

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (1 Corinthians 15:6-8).

James appears to have been the chief elder in the Jerusalem church and history tells us that he was a respected man of prayer and wisdom. So when he said, "listen to me," he was speaking with some measure of authority based on a holy life and his relationship to Jesus.

v. 14 – We see team ministry here at its finest. First, James endorsed what Simon Peter had said. Then James built on that to continue the line of thinking and reasoning that the Spirit was establishing. Yet James saw all this as God's concern for the Gentiles. The apostles saw that they were to continue the initiative of the Spirit, serving as His assistants and lieutenants. They were not to establish their own priorities but follow the Spirit's. People ask me why I spend so much time in Africa. It is because I see God's initiatives here and I sense that He wants me to bring the purpose message here. But this isn't my purpose message—it's His.

I have also been asking the Lord two questions recently: who is on my team, and on whose team am I a member of? Team ministry is so crucial, for the Lord gave each of us something to offer but not enough to get the job done. **So I ask you the same questions: Who is part of your team to help you do God's will, and on whose team do you serve to extend the kingdom of God?**

v. 15 – Picking up Peter’s thoughts, James then began to tie the current work among the Gentiles to the Old Testament. Notice that he began with the experience and then moved to the Scriptures. Most people want to have it the other way around, wanting to base and initiate all activity based on Scripture. But sometimes the Spirit directs and leads, and you must then go back to seek insight from the Scriptures to explain what the Spirit is doing.

Day Two

16 "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18 that 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. 20 Instead 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. 21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

vs. 16-18 – James quoted the promise from Amos 9:11-12, but he was referring to the fact that David brought the ark of the covenant back to Israel, but he put it in a tent that was accessible to more people than just the high priest. This was a radical departure from the model of Moses and completely different from what Solomon did when he built the Temple. So James must have understood that what David did with the ark was a shadow of what Jesus would do by pouring out grace on the Gentiles. This was a radical departure from the majority mentality in Israel, which believed that the Gentiles would have to become Jews for the promise in Amos to be fulfilled.

This was such a critical decision and interpretation, for it opened the door for most of us to come to know Jesus without first becoming Jews. I am grateful to the Holy Spirit for His work and I admire the early church leaders who went against the thinking of the day to make a stand for the Lord. Can you do the same thing? Can you go against the prevailing culture to take a stand for the Lord? Can you fulfill the truth found in Romans 12:2?

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

v. 19 – Notice that James didn’t say that the Lord had impressed him or that God spoke to him. He left room for those present to judge what he said by maintaining that it was his judgment that they should not put any additional burden on the Gentiles, such as requiring them to follow the Law of Moses.

v. 20 – Yet James suggested that they write the Gentiles a letter from Jerusalem that contained some interesting directives, which have been the subject of debate and scrutiny. My opinion is that James was trying to make the Gentile converts sensitive to some of the

things that Jewish believers would have found most objectionable. I say this because later Paul wrote that meat sacrificed to idols wasn't a bad thing unless someone's conscience was offended when they saw another believer eat it (see 1 Corinthians 8).

v. 21 – I think James was saying that anyone who wanted to hear or follow Moses could find places to go where they would hear the Law expounded. Instead the Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus could and should go to a place where they were taught about Him and not Moses. This was wise. Yet I felt after this that James and the Jerusalem church were always supportive but apprehensive about Paul and his work among the Gentiles. I think Paul got what he needed here to continue his work among the Gentiles, but I also think that the Jewish believers weren't always happy with the results. When Paul returned to Jerusalem in later years, the Jewish believers were happy but perplexed concerning how to handle Paul:

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you (Acts 21:20-23).

What can you do to stand with God's leaders who are doing a good work that may be misunderstood by some? Do you identify with all God's people or only those with whom you agree or whose ministry style is compatible with your own? There are many leaders whose ministry style isn't according to my taste or understanding, but I always try to support them nonetheless. Do you do the same? I keep in mind that my enemy is the devil and not those who preach or teach differently than I do.

Day Three

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. 23 With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

v. 22 – The early church was in to elections. They chose a replacement for Judas, then elected the first deacons and now chose their representatives to go to the Gentile churches. The early church trusted God and the Spirit to direct the church. They weren't swayed by successful business people or generous donors. They looked for character and chose church leaders not based on politics but based on God's choices. And in this case, they chose two men named Judas and Silas. Silas we hear about again, but Judas we don't—although some believe he may have been the writer of the short epistle Jude, who was also believed to be a brother of Jesus.

v. 23 – The church followed James advice and sent a letter, which as I stated earlier, became irrelevant shortly thereafter. But there are some parts of it that are noteworthy, pardon the pun. First, we see that there was a distinction between the elders and apostles among the leaders, which shows that there are distinctions and rank even among leaders in a local church. The elders had more responsibility for the local church; the apostles for the church at large.

Second, the Jewish believers referred to themselves as the brothers with the Gentile believers. Thus, they saw them all part of the family of God in Jesus. The leaders were seeing that God had a bigger family than just the Jewish community. Third, the letter was addressed to only three regions, which had quite a few Jewish residents. Paul was to go on future journeys that would take him to places where there were no Jews, which is why this letter became outdated and irrelevant so quickly.

I don't think the apostles and leaders really understood just how broadly the gospel would spread over the next few years, otherwise they would have addressed the letter to a much broader and comprehensive audience. **Are you thinking big enough where God is concerned? Big enough for you, your family, your ministry or business? Are you setting what one business writer called BHAGs?—big, hairy, audacious goals. If not, then you may be limiting God by your own lack of vision.**

v. 24 – The apostles acknowledged that those who had gone out with the teaching that the Gentiles believers had to follow the Law were unauthorized messengers. There are still unauthorized messengers in the church. They may even have a correct message, but the Lord or His designated leaders haven't sent them out. It isn't enough just to be right, for you must also have a right attitude and heart if you are going to be effective for the Lord. **Are you an authorized messenger? Are you carrying the Word of truth, commissioned by God and authorized by His church? I certainly hope that you are.**\

Day Four

25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

v. 25 – The Jerusalem church didn't want to just send Paul and Barnabas, for then it could have been perceived that those two men brought back the message of which they were in favor. So the church sent some local representatives to endorse what Paul and Barnabas had been saying all along: the Gentiles were free from the Law to follow Christ.

Notice that this letter still listed Barnabas first in the team of two missionaries. It is my opinion that Paul wasn't ever popular in Jerusalem, but Barnabas had come from their midst. You can never eliminate the human element in the church. That element includes likes and dislikes, character quirks, personality clashes and personal preferences. We have often assumed the presence of God will eliminate such human frailties and interpersonal dynamics. The truth is that the Spirit doesn't eliminate these, as we shall soon see as this missionary team splits over a disagreement concerning their traveling team.

Are you having problems with some of the believers around you? In some sense, I would advise that you not take that too seriously. You must love all the saints, but there are some that you just won't like. So work with them to do the work of ministry and then go home and spend time with others with whom you have more in common or with whom you have a better relationship.

v. 26 – Barnabas and Saul had risked their lives for Jesus, which seemed to earn them special honor and notoriety in the church. The same should be true today. Not everyone has the spirit of adventure, or is called to a life of danger. So don't try to be who you're not, but honor those who represent you with tough ministry assignments.

v. 27 – The early church took their credibility seriously. Here the church sent witnesses to authorize and verify what they wrote and decided. Later, Paul sent emissaries with his benevolent offering so that there was no question as whether he had sent it all or held some back for his own purposes:

And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. **For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men** (2 Corinthians 8:18-21).

Are you doing what is right not only in the eyes of God but also of men? It is always worth the extra effort to avoid any criticism or question concerning how you carry out the work of God.

v. 28 – The church council and leaders spoke for the Holy Spirit *and* the church. That shows their confidence in Jesus' promise to them:

"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, **he will guide you into all truth.** He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you (John 16:12-15).

If leaders acknowledge God's leadership in the local church, He will lead and guide. When the leader starts to refer to the church as "my" church or the staff as "my" staff, then there is a question of who is the true leader: God, or the pastor and elders. You may think I am "splitting hairs" on this issue, but out of the heart the mouth speaks. And when leaders begin to see themselves as owners instead of stewards, God's leadership is diminished.

v. 29 – Here again the letter reviewed what the council had decided: The Gentile believers should avoid current heathen practices that were particularly offensive to Jews and Jewish believers. I wonder, too, if any of those conditions were concessions to the large group of Jerusalem believers who were advocates of the Law being followed? At any rate, the letter was short and sweet and was simply signed "farewell."

Day Five

30 The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

v. 30 – Does this mean that the church was of such a size that they could find one place for it to meet, or did this involve multiple meetings and meeting sites? We aren't really told, but my own impression is that there weren't thousands of believers in the Antioch church at this time. Perhaps more Gentiles were waiting to see whether they had to be circumcised or not before they converted! But these leaders went about their work diligently and didn't waste any time. We should all have such urgency where spiritual matters are concerned.

v. 31 – The church was glad and encouraged by the letter. That should be our goal whenever possible: to encourage one another in the faith.

So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12).

For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down (2 Corinthians 10:7-8).

This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority — the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down (2 Corinthians 13:10).

What can you do to build up the church you are in? Is that your aim? Is there anyone in particular that you can call or write today with the express goal of encouraging them? Is a local church getting at least some of the benefit from your spiritual gifts?

v. 32 – Judas and Silas did just that: They used their prophetic gifts to strengthen the believers. Keep in mind that these believers were a small outpost in the midst of heathen culture. They were frail and susceptible to error and spiritual attack. I am a strong organizer and I try to always help the churches where I go with my spiritual gifts. **Even though I get paid to do what I do, I try to offer my gifts at times where I cannot get paid, but where it will benefit my brothers and sisters. How can you do the same?**

v. 33 – Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem in peace by the church in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas, of course, stayed behind. The brothers in Jerusalem had sent them forth; the brothers in Antioch sent them back. These men were under the authority of whatever church body they were in, having been commissioned by the Lord Himself to help build His church. This is an ideal example of how things worked in the early church. **Today, there are many who come and go under their own authority, not needing the blessing of the local churches. Their ministries don't benefit the church, but rather individual believers. Instead of blessing the church, they can actually make local church work more difficult. Instead of blessing the church, they siphon off money and people from the local church. Is this too harsh? Do you agree or disagree with what I just wrote?**

Day Six

35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. 36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.

v. 35 – Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch and, now that the Gentiles were freed from the shadow of Judaism, the church grew in numbers and wisdom. Notice that Paul and Barnabas didn't have an exclusive "franchise" in Antioch, for many others taught and preached the Word. We can't have too many workers in the field, and that is why I am so baffled why so many churches are opposed to church growth and church planting. I worked with one church one time who had a young man who wanted to go out and plant a church. He had been in the church eight years and had been faithful. But the leadership was opposing him like he wanted to plant a mosque!

Now I don't believe that anyone should be able to plant a church any time they choose, but I think every church should have some kind of plan in place for multiplication. Also every church must pay attention to the development of men and women in ministry and that means opportunities for people to release and develop their spiritual gifts including preaching and teaching.

Ultimately, however, every person is responsible for his or her own personal and ministry development. I sat and preached only twice in 11 years while as associate pastor and that was wrong on my part. There are 2 billion people in the world, so I should have been

going somewhere to preach something to someone. **Do you agree with this or not? What are you doing to develop your gifts and ministries?**

v. 36 – Paul then proposed to Barnabas that they return to visit the churches they had started during their first journey together. This sounded like a reasonable request, borne out of concern for the believers there.

vs. 37&38 – Obviously, Barnabas agreed they should do this, but wanted to take John Mark with them again. If you remember, John Mark went with them on the first journey, but left the team rather abruptly (see Acts 13:13). We are told in Colossians 4:10 that John Mark was Barnabas' cousin. We can only speculate why John left in the first place and why Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. It would make sense that Barnabas favored him because he was his relative.

But Paul didn't think it wise to take a man with them who had left them once before. And Luke used the word "deserted" here, so it seems that John Mark's departure on the first trip had been sudden and, at least from Paul's perspective, unwelcome. I'm not sure what role John Mark had on the original trip, but his departure did not sit well with Paul.

It is my impression that Paul was a great man, but not an easy man to get along with. He was controversial, strong, unyielding and stubborn. That is what made him so successful, but also made him so difficult to relate to. Paul had trouble in Jerusalem, in Corinth and lists more than a few people in his letters to Timothy who had deserted or disappointed him. He confronted Peter as he described it in Galatians and caused riots and uproar wherever he went.

My point here is that I stopped having any romantic ideas about Paul long ago, but my respect and admiration have increased for him over the years. He was a difficult man, but one greatly used by God. God used Paul to do great things, but Paul wasn't perfect. This is an important lesson because I think many people are waiting for God to change them (or at least improve them) before they feel they are ready to be used. I reject this thinking. God is ready to use you now! The New Testament model is one of action and involvement soon after conversion; there was no patience for anyone to wait 10 or 20 years to fulfill their purpose.

And Barnabas was simply being true to his name, the son of encouragement, in this case. He probably couldn't stand the thought of hurting John Mark, who had probably made a mistake and was ready to go back on the field with the missionaries. Every cell in Barnabas' body was devoted to encouragement and he just couldn't do something that would have discouraged. **Both Paul and Barnabas were great men and God used them, weaknesses and all, to do great things. Are you ready to be used today? Not in five years, but today? Are you ready to allow God to work His strength through your weakness? Can you move your self-awareness to God-awareness so that you can accomplish something for God?**

Day Seven

39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

vs. 39&40 – When I read these verses, I think of the line from our weddings that states, “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” The Holy Spirit put Paul and Barnabas together in Acts 13:2, but they separated in Acts 15:39. The human dynamics—personality, opinions, family matters, betrayal, weakness—all contributed to the demise of this great team. Barnabas went home to Cyprus with his cousin, but Paul was commended by the brothers to go back and visit the churches that Barnabas and he had started.

As I mentioned earlier, I think Paul was a difficult man to get along with. And it seems that Barnabas was not commended by the church in Antioch, so he very well could have taken up an offense on behalf of his cousin. Try never to take up someone else’s offense. If they get crossways with someone, that is between them and that other person. Try to be a mediator or reconciler, but don’t take sides. You can never know everything that took place or understand perfectly the position of both parties. Barnabas took up an offense for an issue that was between Paul and John Mark. It cost him a place on the ministry team that God had put together.

v. 41 – Paul took Silas with him, but we hear nothing much about Silas from this point forward. Most of the attention was focused on Paul. I think this would have been the case no matter who escorted Paul; he was the lead man and that’s the way it was going to be. I am not criticizing Paul. Only someone with a dominant style like Paul had could have done what he did. But that made him hard to relate to.

It also occurred to me the other day that Paul’s greatest legacy was his writing. None of the churches he planted survive to this day, but his writings are read by millions and are timeless. I doubt if he understood this dynamic or the implications of his suffering or his letters. God honored this man with a place in history that is reserved for very few.

Do you keep a journal? Have dreams of writing? Then why don’t you? You don’t know what God will do with what you produce until after you produce it; that’s why it’s important to act on your ideas and creativity. You could even add your own notes to this study and have a journal of sorts. Your writing doesn’t have to be for anyone else but you, but God can use and publish that in some way to bless others.