

Acts Midweek Study 5

Today's study is what ensured that the gospel of Jesus Christ could be preached to anyone, anywhere, at any time in history. Today we are looking at Acts 15. If you are watching the video, go ahead and watch it now.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snQEbdRobKU>

If you need the second link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pShxFTNRCWI&t=0s> and watch from 5:40.

For discussion: either kick off with what you all got out of that, or read through chapter 15 together, stopping to make observations.

If you don't have access to the video, read through chapter 15, and then the below.

The first two items in this list are straightforward. In order not to offend their Jewish brothers, Gentile believers should abstain from the “things polluted by idols”—in other words, “from what has been sacrificed to idols” ([Acts 15:29](#)). This likely refers to participation in pagan temple feasts or eating food that had been sacrificed to an idol. Although idols aren't real gods, someone from a Jewish background could be offended by even a remote association with pagan practices. Therefore, it's better to avoid the association altogether. Paul addresses this question in more detail in [1 Corinthians 8](#). There, Paul says he would rather never eat meat again than cause a fellow believer to fall into sin ([1 Cor. 8:13](#)).

The second item in the list—abstaining from sexual immorality—is part of the moral law, and Gentile Christians are enjoined to follow a sexual ethic in line with God's design for sexuality and marriage. This prohibition likely has a cultic religious dimension in mind, as pagan worship often involved temple prostitution. But while this command has a cultural dimension (thus warranting inclusion in James's list), it's also part of the moral standard applicable for all believers for all time ([Rom. 13:13](#); [1 Cor. 5:11; 10:8](#); [Rev. 21:8](#)).

What about the third and fourth items on James's list? These requests—abstaining from what's been strangled and from blood—may seem odd to most modern ears. An awareness of the historical context, though, helps explain why these prohibitions were included in a conversation about Jew-Gentile fellowship.

The Jewish concern for rightly handling blood originates in [Genesis 9:4–6](#). There God first allowed Noah and his descendants to eat animal flesh, while still forbidding them to eat blood, highlighting the fact that the animal's blood is its life. This same teaching was later codified for Israel in [Leviticus 17:10–16](#), where God explicitly prohibited the eating of blood. The reason for this command is given in [Leviticus 17:11](#): “For the life of the flesh is in the

blood and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”

Two important truths are communicated here. First, blood is sacred because it represents life. As [Allen Ross](#) explains, “When blood is shed, life is relinquished.” Second, within the sacrificial system, the life-blood is the means by which atonement is made for the one bringing the sacrifice. Based on this reasoning, one can see why animal blood was a fitting (albeit imperfect) type of the final sacrifice, whose blood alone actually takes away sins ([Heb. 9:22; 10:4; 1 John 1:7](#)). For these reasons, the Israelites weren’t to devalue blood by human consumption.

With this historical context in mind, James’s request that the Gentile Christians refrain from eating blood should be understood as a matter of preserving fellowship between Christians of differing cultures. By following the council’s guidance, the early church exhibited discretion and forbearance—traits necessary for deep, authentic fellowship to flourish in diverse, multi-ethnic congregations. Because Moses “has had in every city those who proclaim him” ([Acts 15:21](#)), Jews around the ancient world would’ve struggled if Gentiles flaunted their liberty without regard for these particular Jewish sensitivities. Living in a diverse community was challenging enough already; there was no need to antagonize a brother or sister unnecessarily.

We can learn at least two things from the Jerusalem Council. First, on matters pertaining to the gospel, there is no room for compromise. The apostles and elders were firm and swift in their denunciation of those who sought to add works to the gospel. Salvation is by faith alone through grace alone; human effort is excluded.

Second, grace should be extended for differences that aren’t central to the gospel. The council demonstrated great wisdom in forging agreement on cultural issues that could’ve wrecked the church’s unity. Later, Paul seems to soften his approach to nonessential issues such as food and the observation of days, saying they should be left to each person’s conscience ([Rom. 14–15](#)). But in these early days, it was incumbent on Gentile believers to abstain from certain practices for the sake of Jewish Christians. By adhering to the council’s advice, a basis for joyful unity rooted in the gospel was established ([Acts 15:31](#)).

While the question of blood is no longer pressing for most Christians, the way it was settled provides important lessons for Christians today.

As our congregations continue to deal with essential and tertiary issues within our midst, we should follow the example of the Jerusalem Council first and foremost by loving God and preferring our neighbour above ourselves.

Taken from enduring word.

What other applications do you pull out for us today?