

The Jerusalem Council's Conclusion

The Law Was Not Done Away

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Can you remember the time you first sent your children out to do something without you? Parents usually get nervous when they send their kids somewhere without them for the first time. This is a big step in their maturation. You are finally trusting them to go out on their own and the best situation to do that is when you send them out with a larger group of older children, teenagers—that includes maybe some late teenagers to give some responsible, wise leadership in the party—and you send them to a mall or maybe they all go to a movie in this big group or maybe they find a ball game somewhere and enjoy it together, some entertainment venue.

If you were typical of most parents, and I think we are mostly typical parents here, you sent them off with some advice, a few last-minute instructions to make sure that they understood that they needed to behave themselves. So you say things like, stay with the group, do not wander off. If you do nothing else, do not go to the bathroom alone. Be careful what you get to eat. Or do not spend your money foolishly or "don't take any wooden nickels." But you give them some parting advice to send them on their way so that they will have a good time but also come back without any problems at the end of whatever the entertainment is.

Now, think of it from the other side. When parents give these cautions to their children before they go to do whatever they are going to do, the kids know implicitly that all the other family rules and regulations still apply. I mean, they would have to be a real "C" lawyer to say, oh, all I have to do is stay with the group, do not go to the restroom alone, be careful of what I eat and do not spend my money foolishly, and I will be fine. I can do whatever else I want to do. But no, the kids realize that all the other family rules and regulations apply. They should know by this time that the Ten Commandments apply when they do these other things, even though you are not there. And everything else that their parents have ever taught them about how they should behave.

Kids know this. Mom and Dad have stressed these things for long enough to know that they will be held responsible for their actions. So just because parents give their children a specific set of rules for the entertainment venue that they are going to be enjoying does not abolish their previous teaching. Right? I think that is pretty well understood.

Now in AD 49 at the Jerusalem conference, a similar but far more important matter occurred and we will discover through this Bible study.

As in my opening example here, that just because a group of people are given specific instructions in order to deal with their situation, it does not mean that the other laws that have been given do not also apply to them. It is a very simple way to understand what happened at the Jerusalem conference. Now the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 (where we will be for most of this Bible study), is one of those historical events that nominal Christianity likes to use the instructions given at the end of Acts 15 to say that the council decreed that the law was done away.

I kind of mangled that. Let us just say nominal Christians like to go to this chapter and say the Jerusalem council is a great example of the apostles doing away with the law. And they go further. Because of this, they reason, because they did this for the Gentiles, and since, they assume, they are Gentiles, that is all they have to do.

Now, being in a Western nation, how many of these prohibitions that James put in the letter do they have to worry about? I mean, abstain from things offered to idols. That is really easy to do these days. From blood. Again, pretty easy. From things strangled. There is three out of the four that are pretty easy to get around in these days. And then finally, the one that they kind of hide their eyes to is from sexual immorality. But we will get to all these things later.

But it is a pertinent question for us to consider that: why does the Jerusalem council not do away with the law? Well, it does not, and it is pretty easy to see that it does not. But we need to understand it in context so that we can have it in the back of our mind if anybody should ask us about it.

So they say, because the apostles did not require circumcision, which is found in the law of Moses, of the Gentiles, then the keeping of the whole law is thus not required. If you do away with this one thing, they reason—and I wonder if that is even the right word because it is not very good reasoning. It is a huge leap of logic to think that if you do not require circumcision, then the rest of the law is gone. I mean if you take away one—it is all gone. They then they say, well, it is not just there; this is all over the New Testament that the law of God has been done away, and they go to their specific proof texts in various parts of Paul's writing, normally, that specifically on this point that circumcision avails nothing.

They love to quote that. Hey, Paul said in Romans 2:25-27 and I Corinthians 7:19 and Galatians 5:6, that circumcision does not mean a thing. And so the law is gone. We do not have to keep it. And all of this so-called reason is proof that they misunderstand Paul's argument from the very beginning. They are grasping at straws so they do not have to keep the law.

And so they will take something out of context or they will not understand the context at all and come up with very wrong conclusions.

I want to give you what Paul is talking about when he talks about circumcision. Invariably, when Paul is talking about circumcision, he is talking about it as a work, as a means of justification before God. He argues that circumcision makes no difference. This is important for that purpose. Circumcision makes no difference as a work, as a means of justification before God. He is telling people that your circumcision does not grant you salvation or justification. It does not work that way. It is not what circumcision is about. And of course, salvation—or you could say justification—is by grace. There are no works, no matter what they are, that is going to give you the justification by God. It is all by grace. And God saves both Jew and Gentile the same way—by grace.

We should go look at that in Ephesians 2, just to say we did and to remind us, cover all our bases here.

Ephesians 2:4-6 But God, who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have

been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, . . .

This is all talking about Christ having struck down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile and brought them into the same body, and now he is saying that His means of justification for both Jew and Gentile is the same. By grace you have been saved, whether you are a Jew or whether you are a Gentile, and you have been raised up together and made to sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:7-9 . . . that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus [and then he repeats it]. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

This is very clear. I could basically put my notes in my Bible and sit down because this is the answer to the question that was coming up. Jew and Gentile are saved, justified the same way. It is by grace. God chooses us by His own will, by His own volition, and then He shows love to us and mercy and grants us this favor that we could come before Him, be drawn to Christ, and have our sins forgiven once we accept the sacrifice of Christ. Well, repent and accept that sacrifice of Christ.

Let us just go a little bit further here.

What about baptism? Is that not a work? Is that not something we have to do in order to be saved. Well, the answer is no. It is not a work that we have to do in order to be saved. It is the same as, if you will, as circumcision in that respect. It is a righteous requirement. It says that in Matthew 3:15 because Jesus said He had to be baptized for righteousness' sake. But baptism does not save us. It is a ritual we go through, but it acts as a sign of our spiritual death and resurrection in Christ, and it shows everybody else, as a sign, that we have accepted the New Covenant. We have entered this body.

But the saving is all done by grace. Many people have been baptized. Many millions of people have been baptized. But it is only a few of those who are saved, who have been saved. So God's grace is a unilateral divine act of election, love, and mercy.

Our only action, as Paul argues in Romans 4 (we will not go through there); this is when he talks about Abraham and he says that our only action is to believe. Abraham believed, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. So what we have to do is to exercise faith. That is our response to God's grace: to exercise faith. And Paul just told us in Ephesians 2:9 that it is a gift of God. Even the faith is a gift of God. He puts it there so we could turn to Him and move along in the process.

Now this is a truth that we need to have in mind as we look at the Jerusalem council. This is what is behind, as we will see, Paul and Barnabas having all these disputes with these people that causes the Jerusalem council because Paul and Barnabas were preaching that we are saved by grace and not by works. And the only way both Jew and Gentile can be saved is by grace. And any kind of thing like circumcision in which you are trying to show a work, an action, something you do in order to be justified, does not work. It does not count toward justification, salvation.

Let us get into Acts 15. I am going to be reading most of this. I will skip a few verses, but they are very few. I want you to get the whole feel of what is going on here. Starting in verse 1:

Acts 15:1-2 Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question.

We are going to take this to headquarters. We are going to find out what the combined wisdom of the apostles and the elders that are there in Jerusalem are going to rule on this very particular question: can Gentiles be saved even though they are not circumcised? Verse 4.

Acts 15:4-5 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

What they were saying essentially (if I can just get it into a soundbite) is you had to be a Jew in order to be saved; you had to go through the Jewish way that they taught for salvation. So Gentiles had to be Jews. Now if we would go back to Matthew the 23rd chapter, we would find that Jesus castigates them for proselytizing and making these Gentile converts worse than them. What did He call them? Sons of hell or something like that, because they made them go through all of the Jewish traditions and begin to keep them and then finally to be circumcised in order for them to come into the Jewish religion.

Let us return here to verse 6.

Acts 15:6-11 So the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

This sounds very much like what Paul said in Ephesians 2. Peter just puts it in his own lingo, his own vernacular. This is Peter; and Paul said what he said there in Ephesians 2, and it lines up very much the same.

Let us go down to verse 13,

Acts 15:13-21 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this, the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this, I will return and rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord, who does all these things.' Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore, I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach Him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

So James here says basically what Peter says. He supports him and then he adds stuff from the Old Testament. He says, look, God prophesied way, way back in Amos and in other places, that He was going to bring the Gentiles into covenant with Him. And so he said God has known from eternity that He was going to do this. This is a great work of God and it just had exploded in their laps, and they were having to deal with it because this is the first time when God had essentially opened up salvation to the Gentiles.

So He is saying here as he concludes, let us not trouble them anymore except for these few prohibitions that he names, because they know the law. This is exactly what he says in verse 21, "For Moses has had throughout many generations, those who preach him in every city being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." So he said, we do not have to send them a great many detailed long pages of instructions about how they should conduct themselves as Christians. He is assuming here that they are becoming Christians and so he says they have Moses.

They have been in the synagogues. This is where they have probably heard most of what they have learned about the true way. They have learned it in the synagogues. Moses' law, the Torah, has been very much out there in the public. All they needed to go to was a synagogue to hear it, and so James is

saying they know what God requires. They know what the Bible says. So only these four things we should remind them about. And I will get to that in a little bit. So, let us go on in verse 22.

Acts 15:22-29 Then it pleased the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas, who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment—it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

That is basically the end of the Jerusalem council. Now, we could spend literally sermons on the Jerusalem council, but the gist, as we have just seen, is that some pharisaical Christians believed and preached that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses before being considered members. You can see that in verse 2 and verse 5. And Peter argues that when he had visited Cornelius, God made it clear that He made—this is important—no distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

Let us go back to that. Acts 10, verses 28 and 29. This is Peter talking about coming to Cornelius.

Acts 10:28-30 Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or to go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. [And then he says he came as soon as he could.] Therefore, I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I asked then, for what reason have you sent for me? And Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing."

Acts 10:34-35 Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I believe that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.

And finally,

Acts 10:43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

So here he is saying Jews and Gentiles are treated the same. God chose no partiality. That he understood by what God had showed him that everybody, Jew and Gentile, is saved by grace through faith. That is just the way it is. He figured it out very quickly. And of course, in the next verses when the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles even before they had been baptized, Peter said, This is God confirming that I had logically concluded the right thing.

Let us go back to chapter 15 and we are going to look a little bit further at verse 11. And this, I believe, is the crux of the matter. This is the central principle. I have been repeating it a lot.

Acts 15:11 We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.

Israelites and Gentiles are granted salvation in the exact same way. By grace there is no distinction, there is no division. There is no this for one group and that for the other. And since circumcision has nothing to do with justification

or salvation under the New Covenant, the church should not require it of the Gentiles for the purpose of salvation.

Let us go back to verse 10. Peter says responding to those who were opposing him.

Acts 15:10-11 "Now therefore, why do you test God [Those are fighting words here. Why do you test God? Because remember, it was Israel testing God that got them in trouble.] by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Here Peter calls the law of Moses a yoke of bondage, an unbearable yoke. No one could bear it. Over hundreds of years of trying to keep this law of Moses, they could not do it and it was horribly burdensome. Again, go back to Matthew 23 and all the things that Jesus told the Pharisees about pushing the law of Moses onto the people, and they would not lift their finger to lift one of the burdens that they were putting on them.

Now we need to understand at this point what the law of Moses means to the people here in this council. It is defined actually in context. Let us go to verse 1. God is wonderful. He defined the problem in the first verse.

Acts 15:1 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

The first thing we see about what is under dispute here is a thing called the "custom of Moses." This word custom is our word basically, ethos. You have heard about like a society, societal ethos or the ethos of a certain group or even an individual or a small group of individuals. And this word ethos means a custom or a tradition. In our own language, in our own usage, and this is consistent with the usage in Greek, ethos is the characteristic spirit, beliefs, and aspirations of a community, a culture, or an era. We can further define it that ethos is a code word for the laws, rituals, and traditions of a particular society or a particular people.

And so here in chapter 15, verse 1, by them saying the custom of Moses, what they are actually using is a code phrase for the laws, rituals, and traditions of Judaism. Not God's, not the Torah, not the Bible, not Scripture, but this is a code phrase for the laws, rituals, and traditions of their religion, Judaism.

In large part this refers to what became Jewish *halaka*. The whole body of Jewish teaching, legislation, and practices that proceeded from—listen to this—interpretation and reinterpretation of the Bible's laws; it is distinguished from God's written Word as the oral law or sometimes it is referred to as the traditions of the elders. Specifically, it implies all the nitpicky rules and regulations that had accumulated in the Jewish religion over the centuries since they had returned from Babylon. And those things had become customary—*custom-ary*—traditional for Jews to observe as part of their religious culture.

They believed, this is the most determined Jews, by keeping all those laws, customs, and traditions that God would accept them and grant them salvation. So they had to keep them all. Is that not what James says? If you break one, you break them all. Well, they believed that they had to keep them all. And this was the great burden that the Pharisees were putting on the people and especially the proselytes that were coming in.

They were just burdening them with piles and piles and piles of law and regulations and customs and traditions, and you have got to keep all of these things, 601 or whatever it is, things you have to do to make sure you keep the Sabbath. I mean stuff like that. Like I said, nitpicky. You may carry a piece of thread with you, but you better not carry a needle. If you carry a needle, you are working on the Sabbath. Stuff like that.

These were the things that Peter was talking about in terms of the burden, the yoke that they could not bear. Nobody could keep all those laws, especially as they got more minute. It is just like today, try to keep America's laws; you are probably breaking one now because there are just so many.

Peter, by the time he gets talking about this in verse 10, he is essentially saying that this law of Moses is absurd. And he essentially says to these certain men who came down from Judea or these Pharisees who brought it

up, he was saying "Poppycock to your idea. They are a set of laws, an unbearable yoke that cannot be kept. No one could keep them."

Now this in itself should tell us that what is being talked about here is not God's law, because a loving God would not give a set of laws to His people that they could not keep. (Bill talked a little bit about keeping the letter of the law today.) And God gave them a letter of the law that they could keep. It should not have been all that hard if they loved God.

They could have kept those laws until God deemed to call them and give them the spirit of the law. Some did under the Old Covenant. David loved God's law. Read Psalm 19. He compares it to the universe, to the stars out there. It is just a wonderful thing. He saw that it was so just and good and holy.

But right after coming back from Babylon, the Jews added more and more and more to it. And so it became a burden and impossible to keep.

Let us go to Romans 7. Paul has a different attitude toward the law. This is the law of God. This is not the law of Moses here, the *halaka*. Paul says it is holy, just, and good. It is a spiritual. Let us read verse 12 of Romans 7. He says,

Romans 7:12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

Drop down to verse 14,

Romans 7:14 for we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

There is a big difference between God's law and the person who tries to keep it, but that does not make the law sinful. It just means that, you know, we are not doing what God wants us to do. And then finally in verse 22, Paul here says,

Romans 7:22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.

This is not the same law as what was being spoken about in Acts 15. Peter's reaction to this law of Moses that they were putting forward was indignation. It was, what a horrible thing. So the apostles' reactions to this particular subject showed that they were not considering the law of God. They were considering a man-made set of laws that had accreted so much on top of it that it was unbearable and unkeepable.

Let us go on here. Now we have to understand—thinking about God's law on the one hand and this law of Moses on the other—that circumcision was indeed a part of both. There is circumcision in God's law, and there is certainly a lot about circumcision in *halaka* or in this oral law, the tradition of the elders. The difference is that circumcision had different roles and meanings in each. Circumcision meant something different in God's law versus what it came to mean under Moses' law or the traditions of the elders. The central meaning of circumcision changed.

Let me give you the difference here. In God's law, it was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. From Genesis 17, pretty much the whole chapter there, it was a sign that one was descended from Abraham. And that was not the only thing, was under the covenant with God. Just because a boy or a man was circumcised did not mean only that he was a descendant of Abraham, but that he, by his parents' choice, had put him under the covenant with Abraham, or with God that began with Abraham. He was part of God's people who were going to keep the covenant.

Let us go back to Genesis 17 and notice what they had to do. I will just simplify this in a couple of verses rather than go through the whole thing. We do not have the time.

Genesis 17:1-2 When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you and will multiply you exceedingly."

And then in the next several verses, God elucidates or elaborates on what it is that He will do for them under this covenant. Generally, if you want just the two bullet points about what was required of each party: what was required of the sons of Abraham, for those who were circumcised under the covenant was what is in verse 1: walk before Me and be blameless. What was required of God: I will make My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly and give you all these blessings that He elucidates later on.

There is a very simple covenant and the circumcision was what was a sign of it. So that is what it was under the law of God. It was a sign of the covenant and obviously sign of descent from Abraham, but it does not really mean that even, because Gentiles are people who came into the land and wanted to remain there and live among God's people who were asked to be circumcised. And they became became part of the Abrahamic people.

So it worked a lot like the New Covenant. But it was a sign, simply a sign of one's acceptance of that covenant, and it also says in the Old Testament that there is one law for everybody. You do not treat Jew different from Gentile. If you come under the covenant, you were an Israelite. You were a descendant of Abraham because you entered the same covenant that Abraham entered with God.

And by the way, I just want to append this on the idea about the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant was not the Old Covenant. It was a separate covenant altogether, and the New Covenant is actually modeled more on the Abrahamic covenant than on the Old Covenant. So do not let anybody tell you that circumcision is an Old Covenant thing. It is actually Abrahamic and came before the Old Covenant.

So what was this meaning or the role of circumcision under Moses' law? It morphed from what it was under the Abrahamic covenant into a means of salvation. That you had to be circumcised in order to have salvation under the Old Covenant, which the Jews were trying to extend in their form of Judaism. It showed then that you were included in God's holy nation through lawkeeping and ritual purity. So it began to function more as a work rather than a sign. It was one of those things you had to do in order to be saved.

Now, James concurs with Peter in every point here. And he adds that the Old Testament shows that God had always intended for Gentiles to be included in His Family so there is no need for them to be treated differently in terms of salvation and membership in the church. If they believe and repent and are baptized, obviously hands laid on them, that is enough. There does not need to be anything added, anymore hurdles for them to jump over in order to be in the church.

If a Jew came through the door and a Gentile came through the door, they should be treated exactly the same in every way. And in terms of what they are talking about in the Jerusalem council here, especially in terms of being included in the church, they would be given the same instruction and led through the same things in order to be a member of the church.

Then he adds four prohibitions for them. And you might think, oh, wait a second, he is going against what he just said, that they should not be treated any differently. Well, you may have a minor point there, but it is actually not an addition. It is just a highlight of certain things that they should be wary of.

Why does he do this? And are these the only laws that they need to keep? Well, obviously, the answer to that last question is no. They have to keep all the laws. How do we know this? This Book—especially the New Testament; the Old Testament provides the foundation—but the New Testament tells us what we need to do now in terms of the New Covenant and it reflects then back on to the Old Testament or the scriptures that they had at the time and say this is what was shown from the very beginning that God's people need to do.

So in the New Testament, the Gospels, the book of Acts, the epistles of Paul, and the general epistles, they are all full of instructions about keeping God's commandments, keeping God's law. Every one of the commandments is named in the New Testament as something we should keep. Let us go to a few. Jesus starts us off here in Matthew 19, verses 17 through 19 by giving us a whole slew of them. Speaking to the rich young ruler,

Matthew 19:17-19 He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life,

keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "'You shall not murder,' [That is number six.] 'You shall not commit adultery,' [That is number seven.] 'You shall not steal,' [That is number eight.] 'You shall not bear false witness,' [That is number nine.] 'Honor your father and your mother,' [That is number five.] and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" [which is a summary of them all]

Wow! We are halfway through already, and we have just read a couple verses.

Let us go to Galatians 5. I just kind of almost picked these out at random because there are allusions or commands to keep God's law throughout the New Testament, but just this one, verse 20. These are the works of the flesh. Well, let us start in verse 19.

Galatians 5:19-20 Adultery, fornication, uncleanness [that is another sexual sin], licentiousness [that is another one. [so here in verse 19, he hits number seven hard, but then], idolatry, . . .

That is the gist of commandments one and two. We do not have to go any further there. I was really just picking up idolatry there, but we could go to 21, and there is envy there which is part of the commandment against coveting, and you can see how many of those reflect on the commandments. Colossians 3:5, a few pages over. Similar thing.

Colossians 3:5 Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

What else? Hebrews 4:9. This is one about the Sabbath. It says,

Hebrews 4:9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God [a *sabbatismos*, a keeping of the Sabbath].

We could also go to I Corinthians 5, verses 7 and 8.

I Corinthians 5:7-8 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Let us therefore keep the feast, . . .

He is telling the Corinthian church, which was a very Gentile church, to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

And there is plenty more. I am sure I could have picked up something to cover number three, about either the simple explanation, which is the way you talk about God because there is often profane and blasphemous things that we say, or I could go with the deeper explanation as to how we bear the name of God, and both of them are in the New Testament. I just do not want to take the time to go through all that. But what I am saying is the New Testament is very clear that no matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, you still have to keep God's law. You still have to not do those things that He defines as sin in the law.

And it would be absolutely ludicrous to think that with a judgment like this that he makes in Acts 15, that James was wiping away the whole law of God just by decree. Really, did he have that kind of authority? No. As we see in verse 21, he knew that these Gentiles were hearing the law of God preached in the synagogues and obviously in the churches of God around the empire and so he did not need to worry about that.

So why does he then give these four stipulations, these four prohibitions to the Gentiles? Well, what he does here, it is very simple, is that James highlights a few rampant Gentile sins that were especially highly offensive to Jews. What he is trying to do here is underscore that the Gentiles need to make sure that they do not offend the Jews that they were coming together with in their churches. And he was saying, "Look, you may not be aware, but if you do these four things, you're going to be having trouble with your Jewish brethren. And if you would abstain from these things, you'll get along great and the church will have unity."

So, he highlights these four things. *Things polluted by idols*. Specifically, he is talking about meats offered to idols and sold in the markets, often called the shambles. The Greek word here that is used in verse 20, "things polluted

by idols" is only a food corrupted by idolatry. So this would be foods that were brought before the idol and offered to the idol. To a Jew this would be highly offensive if a Gentile served this to them. They would believe that the meat was tainted by the idol.

Now this was not specifically a sin, as Paul says that the idol is nothing. He says that in I Corinthians 8. But he was worried about it offending those weak in the faith or converted Jews who are still having trouble giving up Moses' law. So it was something that could cause sin within the church and he said, Gentiles, just be careful about this one.

The second one, he told them to *abstain from sexual immorality*. Immoral sexual practices were pandemic, if you will, in the ancient world, just like they are in our own world. And most Gentiles, having no connection to the law of God, had no compunction about practicing them. They participated sexual immorality without shame. Many of the pagan religions also had prostitution built right into them. This was across the whole Mediterranean world at the time. James highlights this; sexual immorality is something that Gentiles would have to be especially careful about. Any kind of even making an impression that they might be going to these things or practicing these things.

Of course, this is one of the Ten Commandments. Number seven, that he was making sure you guys have to be especially careful about this because it is so easy for you to slip into it because you have been doing it all your lives.

The third one: *things strangled*. This refers, of course, to meat that has not drained of the blood of the animal. Believe it or not, it might be repugnant to us, but this was considered a delicacy among the Gentiles to eat meat with the blood. Some pagan sacrifices were also strangled rather than bled to death. And God says that it must be bled. Let us go to Deuteronomy 12, verses 15 to 16 just get the law here.

Deuteronomy 12:15-16 "However, you may slaughter and eat meat within all your gates, whatever your heart desires, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you; the

unclean and the clean may eat of it, of the gazelle and the deer alike. Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it on the earth like water."

So from the earliest parts of our times of Israel, this was a law, and the Jews would have thought it very repugnant to eat meat with blood in any form because the life is in the blood. We know that from Leviticus 17:11 and several other scriptures all the way, going all the way back to time of Noah and probably before then, but that is where it first comes up in the Scripture, and eating the blood violates the life given for our sustenance. So no Jew would eat with a Gentile who served strangled bloody meat.

So this particular prohibition was given to facilitate fellowship among Jews and Gentiles. "Hey, come over to my house. I'm having some bloody meat." He did not want that to happen. He wanted them to, if they, you know, ate together that they were both eating meat properly.

And finally, the one about *blood* is very similar to the one about strangled meat. Some Gentile religions drank blood as part of the ritual toward their god. Some Gentiles drank blood as part of their customary diet. They thought it would make them stronger. It has iron in it, probably did help them that way. But the Jews would consider such people defiled and would not associate with them. Thus, this is another facilitator of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

Clearly, by giving them these four prohibitions, James focuses on widespread Gentile problems that are essentially incompatible with Christianity and would surely offend Jews who are part of the Christian church. This is because Christianity and the religion in the Old Testament, the true religion from earliest times, is a religion of holiness and purity and worship in daily life. And even as late as I John 3:3, we are told,

I John 3:3 And everyone who has this hope in Him [meaning the hope of the resurrection and eternal life] purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Now, if you want an explanation, a theological explanation of what happened here in the Jerusalem council from Paul, he does not say this is

what we discussed in the Jerusalem council, but he makes it a part of his doctrinal statement, his doctrinal teaching in the book of Romans. If you would like, the chapter that deals with this most is Romans 3. So if you would want a summary of the theology of what we are talking about here, you would find that probably starting in about verse 25 of chapter 2 and then going through chapter 3. You will see there that Paul is emphasizing that no matter what our racial background or ethnic background, we are all justified by faith. That is, we are all made upright before God through our belief in Christ's sacrifice and given grace.

And that does not do away with the law of God. It is still effect for Jew and for Gentile. In fact, Paul goes on to say that justification by faith does not void or abolish or do away with God's law. Instead, it does the opposite. It establishes or restores the law to its proper place. It is not the means of justification, but a code. That is, the law is a code that defines what sin is so we can live in righteousness before God and ultimately grow to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.