

## Gentile Abstentions

**The Judgment of James in Acts 15**

**Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

**Given 12-Jul-03; Sermon #621s**

As you know, Carowinds is just up the road from here. And over the past several years, Beth and I have bought season passes. The first year we bought them for all of us, then the last few years we bought them just for Courtney and John to let them go, because as old folks with little kids, we do not like to go all that often, but they do. They enjoy it. They can go there several times during the summer. And we save a pile of money getting the season pass, because you know how amusement parks are, they are just ridiculously expensive to get a daily pass. So, we let them go, and usually they go with Heather, Josh, Joey, and Jenny, and some of the others that also have passes. They all get together and they go in one big group.

But whenever they go, we always give them a few parting instructions, as parents do. We say things like, “Stay with the group! Don’t go into the restroom alone. Watch what you get to eat. Don’t over sugar yourself so that you are vibrating. Don’t spend your money foolishly,” or whatever. They are just prudent cautions and instructions that deal with the particular occasion.

Now, when we say these things (and I know you as parents know this), we and they know implicitly that all the other family rules and regulations apply, as well as the Ten Commandments and everything else we have ever taught them. Just because we gave them three or four explicit instructions that have to do with this particular situation does not mean that we have thrown everything else out. Just because we give them instructions for a specific occasion does not nullify the previous instructions as far back as it goes. We have been teaching these kids the way to go for however long they have been alive.

Now a similar, but far more important thing happened in AD 49 at the Jerusalem conference. Here, if you go to Acts 15, we will find that just

because a group of people are given specific instructions does not mean that other laws do not also apply to them. And it just comes out here as we look through it will be very clear. We are going to start in 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 will 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."

In the next few verses it shows that this was agreeable to the whole church, including the apostles and the elders. And then, they write this letter:

**Acts 15:24** 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. . . .

**Acts 15:28-29** 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.

We could spend many sermons on this chapter, and ministers have, but the gist is that some pharisaical Christians (you will find in verse 5), felt that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses before being

considered members. Peter argued (when you get down into what he had to say) that when he had visited Cornelius, God made it clear in the vision and all the things that happened after that, that he made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles (you will find that he says that very clearly in verses 8 and 9). In fact, Peter called the law of Moses, which here is a code phrase for the rituals and the traditions of Judaism, and not necessarily the law of God, a yoke of bondage that no one could bear (verse 10). And then he very clearly says in verse 11 that salvation is by grace. “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.” Meaning, there is no distinction.

And then, a little bit after James concurs with Peter in every point, he adds that the Old Testament shows very clearly in these prophecies that God has always intended to include the Gentiles in salvation. He had always intended to extend to the Gentiles the offer of salvation. There is no reason, then, for them to be treated any differently in terms of salvation, and membership to the church, because they had been always intended to be saved just as the Jews, just as the rest of the Israelites. If they believe, if they repent and be baptized, that is enough, just as it was enough for anybody else.

However, he adds these different admonitions, I call them *abstentions*, in verse 20. Why does he do that? Are these the only laws that they must keep? Well, obviously not. The Gospels, the epistles of Paul, the general epistles, they are just full of instructions about keeping the commandments. Every one of the Ten Commandments is named somewhere in the New Testament, whether or not it is specifically in a commandment form. But, they are all there.

As I mentioned in the introduction, it would be ludicrous to believe that with the judgment, James wiped away the whole law of God just because they were Gentiles entering the church. No, what James does with these stipulations is highlight a few rampant Gentile sins, especially those that were highly offensive to Jews.

First, he says things polluted by idols. Everywhere this Greek phrase is used, both in the Septuagint and in the New Testament, it is talking specifically about meats—meats polluted or offered to idols, and sold in the markets. The Greek word is used only of food corrupted by idolatry.

We know that later on Paul says that the idol is nothing in I Corinthians 8, but such a thing—the eating of meats offered to idols—could offend those weak in the faith, and it would especially offend the Jews in the church, because they wanted nothing to do with meats, or foods that had anything whatsoever to do with an idol, since God had railed upon them from time out of mind not to do any idolatry, and so it was a very touchy point among the Jews.

The second thing is sexual morality. Immoral sexual practices were pandemic in the ancient world, as they are today, I mean, it is really no different it seems. Gentiles had no compunction about doing sexual sins. There was no shame in it for the most part, because to them it was a wholesome practice that pictured the reproductive cycle of life. We know that many of the pagan religions had ritual prostitution built right into the worship. This was especially true of Diana worship. James highlights this as something the Gentiles would have to be especially careful about because they had been reared in a culture that really did not consider these to be taboo things to do.

Then there is things strangled. This refers to meat that has not been drained of blood. It says specifically in Leviticus 17 (in fact, all of these are found in Leviticus 17 and 18, which are part of the introduction to the holiness code), that if you catch something out in the woods, you have to drain out of blood. But eating strangled meat with the blood in it was considered a delicacy among the Gentiles. There were some pagan sacrifices that were strangled rather than drained of blood. I guess they considered it to be a delicacy for the gods as well. But we know that it says that the life is in the blood. And eating the blood violates the life given for our sustenance. God said that in several places in the Old Testament.

So no Jew would eat with the Gentile who served strangled bloody meat. It just would not happen. We are talking about a church trying to put Jews and Gentiles together. So, James says this to the Gentiles so that there would be fellowship between Jews and Gentiles within the church.

This [these abstentions] was an instruction to facilitate fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

And then there is one that says just simply abstain from blood. This is very similar to abstaining from things strangled, but some Gentile religions drank blood as part of the ritual. And some Gentiles drank blood as part of their customary diet. I remember seeing a documentary not too long ago of an African tribe who herd cattle, and they would take various amounts of blood from the ox or cow's jugular vein, and drink it as part of their diet, thinking that it would give them strength. It was probably full of iron; it might give them some strength. But it is not something that we would particularly care for.

Now the Jews would have considered such people defiled and would not have associated with them. Thus, it was another facilitator of fellowship. Anybody who drank blood, you just would not get along with, because you would consider them to be unclean. And so, he is telling them not only does it say in the Old Testament that it should not be done, but you Gentiles have to be particularly careful about this, because it is part of your culture, and it needs to be done away with.

Some commentators even think that it may not refer to this, but may be an instruction against murder, or having a low regard for human life. It is certainly true that in many of the Gentile nations they have a very low regard for human life. I can think particularly of certain people like the Chinese, sending millions of people to their deaths, and seeming not to care that there were that many slain. But I do not know if that is exactly what James was getting at here, but it is something to think about.

So, it is clear that James was focusing on widespread Gentile problems that are essentially incompatible with Christianity, which indeed is a religion of holiness and purity in worship and everyday life.

So let us conclude in Romans 3 and get Paul's explanation of what was going on here. We will start in verse 21. This is Paul's explanation of this in a doctrinal statement. He writes:

**Romans 3:21-22** But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe, for there is no difference; . . .

Remember, Peter said, “There is no partiality with God.” There is no difference.

**Romans 3:23** . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, . . .

The only way to have salvation, or justification especially, is through faith in Jesus Christ. It does not matter who it is, Jew or Gentile, we have all sinned. And so, the same solution applies.

**Romans 3:24-31** . . . being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.