

Mountains, Molehills, and Which Ones to Die On
Acts Part 2
Downtown
Week 7
October 2, 2022

Alright got a hypothetical scenario for you, you ready? Suppose you're at LifeGroup this week and someone says something you disagree with regarding the Bible, or church, or faith.

So someone in your group who identifies as a Christian says...

- You know I'm a Christian but I don't believe Jesus literally rose from the dead. I think he was a good teacher, who said some good things, but I think we've advanced enough as a society to not believe in stuff like that
 - Uh, ok. What do you with that?
- Hey, I'm a Christian, but I don't believe we need to take the Bible and what it actually says. There's stuff we can accept, but then other stuff, like the stuff Jesus talks about - yes. The stuff Paul or others talk about - no, we don't need to accept that, we're beyond that.
 - Now what?

Or what about if someone in your LifeGroup says really passionately...

- Hey, I'm a Christian, and I am convicted to the core of my being that you cannot be a good Christian and send your kids to public school
- I think to be a solid Bible-believing church, we only need to have a choir up on stage. And any instruments or guitars playing are wordly and its only a matter of time before the culture dictates the church
 - What do we do with that? How do we think about topics like that, especially when people get really heated?

What do we do when we encounter disagreements when it comes to matters of faith and practice? Whether that be towards the more preferential things or the more weighty and theological? What should we make a big deal about and what should we not make a big deal about?

Today's passage alludes to that. So if you have a Bible turn with me to **Acts 15**.

To give us some background: the early church movement is beginning to spread out more and more. And at first it was primarily a Jewish movement. Jesus as a Jew, raises up twelve Jewish men. Jesus obeys and fulfills the Hebrew Bible - He established Himself as the Jewish Messiah and conquers death. And for the first bit of Acts, we see the Gospel reaching primarily Jewish people in their Jewish context. And for the most part, these Jewish Christians have placed faith in Jesus and worship Him while still retaining their Jewish heritage and liturgy.

Now at this point - non-Jews are coming to faith in Jesus, or what the Bible calls "Gentiles." And so now what begins to bubble up within the church is this disagreement that threatens to tear the entire early church apart - and the question is: how Jewish does a Gentile Christian need to be?

After all Jesus was a Jew. He obeyed Jewish customs. He fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures. If you place your faith in Jesus and you're not a Jew - how Jewish do you need to be now?

This is the question that gets raised at the church in Antioch. So let's start reading....

Acts 15:1

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

So Gentiles are coming to faith in Jesus, and you have some guys who are Jewish Christians saying some stuff and notice how black-and-white they are making matters in v.1...if you don't do this, "you cannot be saved." Yo. They're coming in hot.

So real quick...circumcision was part of the Jewish Scriptures as a way to identify that you were part of God's people. And yes, I could make some jokes here about circumcision - obviously - but I'm gonna cut that out...

Verse 2:

Acts 15:2

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them,

"No small debate" is Bible talk for things got heated. Paul and his boys were about to be thrown down in the church over what these guys are saying. (Just in case you thought the early church was all fuzzy thoughts and rainbows - not to much.) So what happens?

Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

The church doesn't know how to handle this disagreement so Paul goes to church of Jerusalem to talk to Jesus' disciples. It's worth noting - that's about 300 miles away from where he is. And it's not like they could just hop in the car and make it there in a few hours. And I bring that up to just say, this question is a big deal to them.

Jump down to v.6:

Acts 15:6-7

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. [7] And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up

As in Peter, one of the original 12 disciples...

Acts 15:7-10

and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. [8] And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, [9] and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. [10] Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

In other words - “God has set the Gentiles apart, he’s cleansed them and made them righteous through faith just like us regardless of their adherence to these rules... they didn’t need to keep them for God to save them... and, honestly, neither did we... like I dunno about you guys, but I wasn’t ever all that good at it... and I was born a Jew!

And then here’s the kicker:

[11] But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Peter says, “Look obedience to Torah is not what saved us. It’s by grace through faith. That’s what saves us. It’s the finished work of Jesus, not our work. Not faith in what we’ve done, but faith in what God has done.”

Then James, another one of Jesus’ disciples, gets up and says basically the same thing:

[19] Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,

Love this. James basically echoes what Peter is saying. The Torah Law could never save you. That was part of its role, to show you that you needed to rely on God’s grace through faith. It was always by grace through faith. So to make circumcision a primary thing on par with faith in Jesus, the disciples are like, “Whoa. Hold up. You got it all wrong.” You’re putting an obstacle in the way of people believing Jesus. And let’s not elevate things like circumcision to things that are primary, lest we get in the way of what God is trying to do in His church.

Alright - so pause on the passage. We’ll get back to it in a bit but let’s step back for a second and ask. Why does this matter? What does this mean for us? Because my hunch most of you did not come here this morning with this burning question in your heart asking, “God, help me understand why circumcision is in the Bible.” So... alright what do we do with this? Here’s what’s going on - **what the apostles are doing here is actually giving us some helpful categories to think through what happens when major disagreements go down in the church.**

The main question they’re asking is what is primary to the message of Jesus and what’s not? What’s essential to the mission of Jesus and what’s not? What are the things worth debating over and what’s not?

And what we're seeing in the passage is the apostles are actually giving us helpful categories to think through disagreements lest we argue over every little thing and our church divides over it. And I find that especially helpful for us given the fact that we live in an age that is so divided - and sadly enough, the church tends to follow suit and want to disagree and fight over everything it seems - how can we think through disagreements constructively?

In fact, as I was writing this I came across something Dr. Gerry Besehears wrote. He's a systematic theology professor at Western Seminary out in Portland, Oregon. And he says when it comes to theological disagreements and how to conduct ourselves in the church, you can actually break it down into four categories - starting with most important to least important. And I thought this was so helpful and clarifying that I wanted to share them with you and then explain them one by one:

- 1 - Die For**
- 2 - Divide For**
- 3 - Debate For**
- 4 - Decide For**

1 - Die For - Tier One. Most Important, the Most Close-Handed stuff you could think of. These are things that determine *whether you're a Christian or not*

These are beliefs and tenets within Christianity that separates us from people of other belief systems. And that's not knocking people who believe other things - We love them, we want Jesus for them, and to be a Christian, things that fall under this category are the things where the Bible draws the line and says, "Bare bones - you need to believe this."

So things like - God exists. Jesus is real. Jesus is God. He actually rose from the dead. You are saved by grace through faith. This is what the apostles hold us as most primary in Acts 15: *That Jesus is the savior of the world and there is no other.* Paul, in the letter to the Christians, backs this up to:

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

So that's the stuff in category one we draw the hardest line because the Bible says this is what you must believe to be a Christian.

2 - Divide For.

These are things that, when it comes to faith and practice - yes, they are hugely important because the Bible says it's hugely important and are pretty foundational to your discipleship, but *they don't necessarily determine whether you're a Christian or not.* Like, if someone is not a Christian and wants to be a Christian, do they need to place their faith in Jesus and also believe (fill in the blank)? No, they don't. But is it hugely important and will impact how you follow Jesus? Yes.

More on that in a bit.

3 - Debate For.

Things generally regarding how we function at the church level and more of the minor theological topics. We're not going to split over it because it does not impact someone's faith in Jesus, and it also is not detrimental to your discipleship...But we still have to land on something because the Bible talks about it quite a bit. And if you disagree, that's ok we can still be in fellowship.

4 - Decide For.

Real talk. I don't love how he labels this one. I think he just really wanted every point to start with the letter D. And that's cool I get it. But basically, what he's saying in this one is preferences.

It does not impact whether you're a Christian. It does not impact how you are cared for. It does not impact how the church operates on a macro level, and there's not a lot of biblical data out there on stuff like this. And when it comes to this - there's a TON of freedom in this matter. But we gotta think through - what's gonna be best for the mission of God? Out of love, are we willing to forgo our freedoms so that more people can come to faith in Jesus?

Alright, so those are the four categories. And like I said, I think this is really helpful to think through. So when disagreements happen regarding faith or practice...to think about it through these categories. **Not everything is of the utmost importance.** Because if you put everything up in the category of "things to die for" then you're going to create a lot of unnecessary obstacles when it comes to people placing their faith in Jesus, and you're gonna have a hard time being in a church family with others and you might even find yourself preaching a false gospel just like the people talking about getting circumcised were doing in **Acts 15.**

At the same time, **it's not as though, when it comes to faith in Jesus, nothing matters at all.** There are some foundational things that you have to believe when it comes to placing your faith in Jesus, and there are some things that are hugely critical to your discipleship to Jesus.

But we need a posture of wisdom, humility, and charity when it comes to how we think about all of this stuff. And whenever a church disagreement arises, we'd say "Ok, which of these four categories would this fall under?"

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So let me give you some examples of how this would play out in our church. Ok? I'm not saying this is how all churches would place things, I'm just saying for us, these are some examples of where this would fall under.

- Say someone says, "Hey, I'm a Christian and I believe Jesus was a good guy and all, but **he was not God.** He didn't raise from the dead. That was a fabrication by the early church to gain power. But hey, I'm still down with everything about living a moral life."

- What would that fall under?
- **Category One.** The Bible would say, “Nah, that ain’t it. To be a Christian, is to follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior. The one who conquered death. The one who has the power to pay for and forgive sin.” If you don’t have that, you don’t have Christianity. So even though you may say you are, Jesus and the Scriptures would disagree.
 - **Disclaimer:** If you’re here and not a Christian, we’re glad you’re here. Hop into a LifeGroup. Ask good questions. And at a certain point,, we would say that being a Christian means you believe this.
- Say someone says, “Hey, I’m a Christian but **I don’t believe the Bible is all that reliable**. I think it was a human document written by primitive people who were stuck in their cultural vacuums. And you shouldn’t take it too seriously.”
 - What would that fall under?
 - Hint: Does someone need to believe that to become a Christian?
 - **Category Two.** Is it hugely important? Yes! I would argue it's absolutely essential if you want to be a faithful Christian to obey what the Scripture says. Because if you don’t I would have a hard time understanding how you can follow Jesus if you’re not reading his Word as though it has authority in your life.
 - Now, I will not go so far as to say “you are not a Christian,” but we would say, after lots of talks over coffee and pleading with you to reconsider and to think through the ramifications, that if you don’t acknowledge the Bible is God’s Word...we love you and I think you’re gonna be frustrated being in our church family AND after a lot of pain and sadness we would eventually say, “I think you might have to find another church because we’re not gonna see eye-to-eye on this one.”
- Here’s another one that’s semi-related. Say someone says they’re a Christian. But when it comes to what the Bible says about **sexuality**. They have a lot of strong opinions against what the Bible says.
- Now is this a salvation issue? No, is all that stuff important? Big time. Yes! But if someone wants to place their faith in Jesus - do they need to place their faith in Jesus for their sin AND ALSO believe in God’s design for sex and marriage? No they don’t. (But again, is someone is a Christian and disregards what the Bible says about sex, we would say, “Hey we gotta talk about this. It’s not the main thing about Christianity - but again, I think your faith is in a whole lot of danger if you don’t subscribe to it. So for our church, we would put this under **Category Two**. And again, because that is so dangerous to your faith, we would even say after we’ve done our best to show this to you we would say, “Hey we love you, we want Jesus for you, and we’re not going to budge on this. And I think you’re going to be really frustrated being in community here and this may not be the right church for you.” Again, not saying you’re not a Christian - but it is to say, this is something biblically speaking we’re not going to see eye to eye on.
 - **Disclaimer:** Again, if you’re here and not a Christian, we’re glad you’re here. We’re not expecting you to hold to what we hold to. Hop into a LifeGroup. Ask

good questions. We're gonna open up our homes to you and be your friend because we love you and want Jesus for you and we want you to one day follow what the Bible says because following Jesus is the best possible thing for your soul.

All right a few more. How we doin'?

- Someone says in LifeGroup says, "Hey, I'm a Christian, I love our church. But I really think we should be **baptizing babies**. Let's dunk them all. Because if we don't, we're not being faithful to the Bible."
 - What would that fall under?
 - **Category Three.** This is not essential to your salvation, this is something not worth dividing over..
 - Does it save you? No. But the Bible does talk about it, so we do have to land on something - and the dominant picture we see is that people are baptized after they've placed faith in Jesus. Now, do you have the freedom to disagree? For sure. In fact, I know a handful of people and leaders in our church who disagree, and they are some of the most loving, humble people I know. And every now and again it will get brought up to us by those people and it's a gracious disagreement. No hard feelings or axes to grind. It's a posture of "Hey I disagree, but I see where you're coming from and you see where I'm coming from, and at the end of the day we're still family." And I think it's one of the most beautiful things about our church.

- Say someone says in LifeGroup says, "I think **women should be elders** and pastors in our church." What do we do with that?
 - I would argue, for our church, this would fall under **Category Three**.
 - Does your position on the topic save you? No it does not. Does the Bible talk about it a lot? Yes. So we need to wrestle with it and come to some answer on it in a way that is faithful to what the Scriptures talk about. And the dominant picture we see in the Bible is that the office of elder/pastor is reserved for qualified men. And again, we've got several members and leaders in our church who love Jesus who comes to a different conclusion on this one and again, they are some of the most gracious most committed people in our church. And we've had great conversations about the topic, and we have verses we each use, and they take a posture of "Hey, I disagree, but I get it, and that's not gonna tear apart what we have here because this isn't something that's gonna break fellowship." And again, I think it's absolutely beautiful that we can have healthy disagreements and still be family together.

Ok last one, (and I'm gonna throw a bunch in so you can figure it out.)

- Someone in LifeGroup says, "Hey, I think the music on Sundays should only be sung by a choir on stage and no instruments." Or, "If you're truly a Christian you should vote this way." Or, "If this were a faithful church, we would have Sunday school, and use this translation of the Bible, and preaching should be done this way, and we would never ask anyone to wear a mask, and etc etc"

- Which category?
- Category Four. That's a preference. And you're welcome to have a preference. I have one, you have one. But here's the thing with preferences:
 - 1 - Do we have the self-awareness and maturity to know this is not something worth dying for or dividing over?
 - 2 - Are we willing to forgo our freedoms and die to our preferences so as to love others so that the mission of God can move forward and we don't inadvertently create an obstacle for people?

I'll give you an example. When I was doing college ministry full-time for about 10 years in a very small college town, when I was at a restaurant, I didn't order a beer. Now I enjoy it and I prefer it. But in a small college town where most of the people I interact with are either underage and/or glorify getting drunk, I was like, "Yea I'm just gonna forgo this freedom I have because I don't want a younger believer to stumble."

Are we willing to forgo and abstain and discipline ourselves - even though we have freedom in Christ - so that the name of Jesus can be shown in us?

In fact, this is what happens in the book of Acts. Look back at the passage again and then we'll wrap up:

This is James speaking to Paul now about the issue:

Acts 15:20-21

but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. [21] For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

So here’s what’s weird about this. James says, “Hey, the law does not save you. It’s by faith. Let’s not burden the Gentiles. BUT THEN, in this two verses he says, “But they should probably still do x, y, and z.” But the thing is, the things they list off all come from the Old Testament law! So what’s going on?

James says this because the Gentile Christians are still in community with Jewish Christians living in the Roman Empire. Sexual immorality: In the pagan world, extramarital sex was commonly accepted as the norm... he was saying, “**The moral laws of God don’t change.** So, heed that.” You say, “Why only mention that one?”... it’s just that this was the one that was commonly accepted. It’s like, “Hey, you are saved by grace through faith AND when it comes to how you live your life, strive to be holy here.”

And what’s with the “not eating meat from strangled animals and blood, food polluted by idols...”? Those things were offensive to Jews—it would cause fellowship problems. That’s why he references the law being read—all the Jews were raised this way. He’s saying, “Don’t make it difficult for your fellow Jewish Christians. They have cultural sensitivities. Be gracious toward them.”

In other words - the primary motivation is mission. To be others-centered. They’re saying “You might still wanna obey parts of the Law because out of love, it would be better for your Jewish neighbors if you did.”

The same happens in Acts 16

Acts 16:1-3

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. **2** He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. **3** Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek

Wait. Wut. I thought we just said you didn’t have to get circumcized. So why did Timothy get circumcised? The man was like in his 30s at that point. I mean...huh? What’s going on because it kinda seems to me from the end of Acts 15 and this passage here is that we still have to obey the Old Testament law.

Timothy is a Gentile, but he’s with Paul, and will minister to mostly Jews and Jewish Christians. So for the sake of mission, for the sake of loving others - he undergoes circumcision. He knows it doesn’t save you, it’s not worth dividing over. But for the sake of mission he lets it happen. And let me just say, to be a full grown man and undergo that even though you don’t have to...man, you really gotta love people. I mean, I love being on mission, but...yike....

Conclusion

Acts 15:30-31

So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

Ultimately we are saved by grace through faith. This is what saves us. This is what unites us. And this leads to the church rejoicing. Praise Jesus that He has saved us, not based on our works but on His finished work. Praise Jesus that He has made us family together from all walks of life. Praise Jesus that He has given us His Word to love and live by so that we can look more like Him. Praise Jesus that the mission of God goes forward. So let's practice wisdom, and charity, and humility so that the Kingdom will continue to move forward not if, but when, we have disagreements with one another.

In fact, every Sunday that's what we do - we celebrate. We take a page from the church in Antioch to hear about what Jesus has done for us and what that means. We gather and we celebrate.

Celebrate in four ways....

Pray

Sing

Give

Communion