

Freedom in Faith

by Chuck Smith

The sermon emphasizes the importance of salvation by grace through faith and the need for unity among believers regardless of cultural differences.

Duration: 53:54

Scripture: Acts 15:19, Romans 14:12-15, 1 Corinthians 6:12, 1 Corinthians 10:23

Topics: "Faith"

Description

In this sermon, James addresses the issue of whether Gentile believers should be required to follow the laws of Moses. He suggests four things for them to do, the first being to abstain from eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. James emphasizes the importance of the attitudes of the heart, as they are the source of a person's actions. He explains that the purpose of the law is to show people their sinfulness and lead them to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. The sermon concludes with an invitation for the congregation to come forward and pray for their needs.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Acts chapter 15. We begin tonight with verse 19. The church council in Jerusalem has convened for the purpose of deciding if the Gentile believers are to be accepted into the fellowship without partaking of the ordinances of the laws of Moses.

Testimony has been given and now James, who is believed to be the half-brother of Jesus, mentioned in Mark, is ready to give his conclusions. It is interesting that James now speaks with authority and for the authority of the council and he says, wherefore my sentence is. So he is sort of as a judge, has heard the evidence and now he is going to give the decision.

Others have offered their opinions, their views, but James will make the decision. And what is the sentence? That we do not trouble them, now there were those who had gone up to the Gentile church in Antioch and had definitely troubled them. They had created quite a dispute.

They had declared that you Gentiles cannot be saved unless you go through the right of circumcision and you keep the law of Moses. And it had created quite a bit of trouble in the church in Antioch. So he is saying we do not trouble them.

Unfortunately it seems like there are always troublemakers in the church. It usually comes from someone trying to push their persuasion and interpretation of the scripture that they believe that God has given in a unique way to them. Usually no one else has ever seen this before, but the Lord revealed it to me.

And they are trying to push it on everyone else. They want you to agree with their off the wall position. We used to say, if you feel that God is giving you a revelation in the scriptures that seems to be different from the normal understanding of that verse, do not seek to share it with us immediately.

But give us an opportunity to first see how it has benefited you in your walk with Jesus Christ. How it has helped you to be more conformed into his image. And then we will come to you and we will ask you just what's happened in your walk with the Lord.

You seem to be so much more committed than you ever were before. You are so Christ like. And our questions will give you an opportunity of sharing this new understanding that you have of the scriptures.

You see, people get unusual ideas or interpretations and then they get very pushy with them. And it creates trouble in the church. Especially when they're trying to get everybody to agree with them.

And it is something that is not in keeping or harmony with the way the church has been teaching the scriptures. Now, the Gentile believers in Antioch have been taught that by grace are you saved through faith. That not of yourselves.

It's a gift of God and it's not of works, lest any man should boast. And they've been established in their relationship with Jesus through faith and trusting in Jesus. And they were all rejoicing that the Lord has opened the door for Gentiles to become a part of the work of God in the world.

And that God has adopted them into the family. And that they are going to be able to share in the kingdom of God. Now, these fellas come along.

Outsiders. And they have this feeling, this idea, this persuasion that no, you can't just be saved by faith in Jesus alone. It takes keeping of the law.

And thus, unless you're circumcised and you keep the law of Moses, you can't be saved. Trouble. Because they are pushing this on the Gentile believers.

So, James said, let's not trouble them, but let's just write to them. And there were four things that they suggested that they do. Number one, abstain from the pollution of idols.

Now, in those days, many of the different religions did practice sacrifices. And oftentimes, they would sacrifice an animal to one of their idols. And then, they would butcher the meat.

When they kill it, they would offer it as a sacrifice to the idol. And then they would butcher the meat. Sometimes it was used in the restaurants.

Sometimes it was used in the butcher shops. Sold in the butcher shops. And so, he is, the church is suggesting to them that they keep themselves from the pollution of idols.

That is, eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Now, Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians, sought to sort of give some guidelines for this. He said, now, the things that the Gentiles sacrifice, they're actually sacrificing to devils and not to God.

And I would that you should not have fellowship with devils. You cannot drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. You cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and of the table of devils.

Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? Now, all things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful for me, but not, all things do not edify. So let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.

And whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that is, you go to buy meat at the meat market. Eat it, asking no questions for conscience sake. In other words, if you see a nice roast there and you think, oh, that would be great for dinner.

You don't ask the butcher, was that meat offered to an idol? Did you buy it from one of the temples? Just buy it and don't ask questions. For your conscience sake. Because if he said, oh, yes, this was offered to an idol, and then you bought it and ate it, you think, oh, you know, and it could bother your conscience.

Now, the meat itself, it's nothing. Jesus pointed out that it's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, but what comes out. So continuing with Paul's instructions, he said, we know that the earth is the Lord's, the fullness thereof.

Everything really belongs to the Lord. And if any unbeliever invites you to a feast and you're sort of disposed to go, eat whatsoever, eat what is ever set before you, asking no questions for your conscience sake. In other words, you have to go to a dinner at the Hilton Hotel and, you know, it's a company dinner and they put a steak in front of you.

Don't say, waiter. Or if the guy announces, you know, uh, the meat we're eating tonight was offered, you know, down at the temple, uh, to, uh, Astarte. And so, you know, this is sort of in honor of her.

Then don't eat it, he said. For the person who invited you, for his sake, don't eat it. And for your own sake, don't eat it.

For your own conscience sake. For the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. It's important that we not violate our conscience.

The Bible says, if a person esteems something to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Now, there are people who have different convictions concerning different things. I was with a man, a pastor of a, uh, holiness church, and we were driving along Huntington Beach and looking at the beautiful surf.

And he knew that I was a minister also, and he said, uh, can you go to the beach? I said, oh yeah. Look at that surf. That's great, you know.

Love to be out there. Oh, I can't do that. Oh, why not? Oh, our church doesn't allow that, you know.

All of the lust and all the beach and, you know, I just don't go there. Well, I don't go to lie in the sand and look at the girls. As soon as I get there, I go out in the surf.

As soon as I get out of the surf, I dry off and come home. And, and, you know, if you have a problem that way, I suppose it would be best not to go. I mean, if you just went and were lusting or whatever, it wouldn't be a good thing.

But, uh, so you see, for him it would be wrong, for me it wouldn't be wrong. However, for his sake, I wouldn't let him know that I was coming back and going to the beach in the afternoon, you know. He might stumble.

Jesus, in Matthew 15, 7, speaking to the Pharisees said, you hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you saying, these people draw near to me with their mouth. They honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

And so he called a multitude and he said unto them, I want you to hear this and understand it. It's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles a man, but that which comes out of the mouth, that is what defiles a man. Then his disciples came to him and said, do you know that the Pharisees were offended after they heard what you said? And Jesus answered and said, every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.

Let them alone, because they are blind leaders of the blind, and if the blind lead the blind, both of them will fall in the ditch. Then Peter said unto him, Lord, what did you mean by the parable? Explain it to us. And Jesus said, are you also without understanding? Do you not understand that whatever enters into the mouth goes into the belly and is cast out into the drop? But those things which proceed out of the mouth, they come forth from the heart.

And that's what defiles a man. For out of the heart proceeds the evil thoughts, the murders, the adulteries, the fornications, the thefts, false witness and blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man.

But to eat with unwashed hands, that doesn't defile you. You see, they were finding fault with the disciples because they had eaten without washing their hands. And that was washing their hands in the ceremonial way that they had decided hands should be washed.

They had a regular ritual. The amount of water that was to be poured over your hands, the way you rub your hands together. First of all, in an upper position with water being poured over it, and then in a downward position rubbing it with water.

And if you didn't go through this little ritual, they say, well, you didn't wash your hands. Of course, it could be that they didn't wash their hands. Now, you know, some people, well, maybe they didn't wash their hands at all.

Maybe they just sat down and grabbed a sandwich and started to eat it. And the Pharisees were all upset. You know, you didn't wash your hands before you ate.

Well, that might not be the most sanitary thing in the world to eat with unwashed hands, but it's not what really is defiling. It's what comes out of a man's mouth that defiles a man, much more than what goes in. What goes in is, it just passes through.

This actually points up the problem that the Jews had with the Mosaic Law. As Paul said, when they read the law, even today, there's a veil over their face. That is, they don't really understand the law or the purpose of the law.

The law is spiritual, Paul said, and we are carnal. And that is where the problem is. They were always interpreting the law in a physical realm, ignoring the spiritual aspects of the law.

And thus, in reading the law, they could feel very smug and self-righteous, feeling that they have kept the law. Because physically, they had not done the action that was forbidden by the law. It could be that they had experienced road rage, and they would love to have just smashed their car into the other car, driving it through the window of a discount store.

And they had the urge and wanted to do that, and they were just holding themselves back, and I didn't, but I hate him for taking my parking place, you know. But then they could go to synagogue and think, oh, I've not violated that law, thou shalt not murder. I'm innocent, you know.

Because they didn't actually club another person to death. But Jesus is saying, look, if it's in your heart to do it, then you're guilty. If you have those feelings and your desire, you're guilty.

If you look on a woman and you lust after her in your heart, then you have violated the law, thou shalt not commit adultery. For the law is spiritual. God was seeking to talk about the attitudes of a man's heart from which his actions spring.

Out of the heart come the murders, the theft, and so forth. And so the things that are in the heart that prompt the actions, that's what the law was actually directed at. Now, when you interpret the law spiritually rather than in a physical way, I no longer can feel smug and self-righteous.

I'm guilty. And that was the purpose of the law, to make the whole world guilty before God. It was never intended by God to make people feel self-righteous.

But it was intended to show them their horrible sinfulness and thus drive them to Jesus Christ for forgiveness, for the washing and the cleansing of their sin. So the Jews did not really understand the law. As Paul said, the veil was over their face even when they read Moses at the present time.

Now, there was the moral law that was pretty much embraced in the Ten Commandments. And we are never really free to break the moral law. When we say, I am not under law but I'm under grace, we're not saying that I can just kill anybody anytime I want because I'm not under the law.

That law, thou shalt not murder, is established. And though I may violate it in my mind, wanting to really get somebody, yet to go around committing adultery, lying, stealing or whatever, there's not a freedom because I'm in Christ to do these things. However, my not doing them does not constitute my being righteous.

I can not do those things and still be unrighteous. My righteousness comes through my faith in Jesus Christ and it is imputed or accounted to me by God because of my faith in Jesus Christ. Now, the issues that are being discussed at this council are basic ordinances of the law with the exception of, and the second thing that the church is writing to the Gentiles is that they keep themselves from fornication.

But basically, they are writing to them about the dietary laws, what should be eaten, the rituals of circumcision and things of that nature, the washing of hands before a meal, and are more sanitary than they are spiritual and should be looked at as such. As far as their eating meat, there were some who believed that as a believer, you should not eat meat at all. And there are Christians today who do believe that you should not eat meat.

The Seventh-day Adventists believe that you should not eat meat and they believe that eating meat is a sin. Paul addressed this issue to the church in Rome. He said, he that is weak in the faith, receive him, but

don't get into doubtful disputations, don't get into arguments with them.

There are always those with some opposing view who feel that they hold to the truth and they create their own websites to tear down anybody else that doesn't agree with them. They set themselves up as judges over the whole church and they feel that if they can condemn others or find fault with others, that somehow it elevates them above it and they get some kind of a psychological kick or something, feeling, well, I am able to criticize Billy Graham and thus I am really greater than Billy Graham. And they seek to build themselves up by tearing others down or they seek to tear down what someone else has built.

In the world, you do have builders and you have destroyers. Those who build up and those who tear down. And I really don't have any time or use for those who want to tear down.

I would rather be with those who are interested in building up. But, he that is weak in the faith, receive him, but don't get into these doubtful disputations. He said, For one believes that he can eat all things.

Another who is weak in the faith, eats vegetables. Doesn't have enough faith to eat meat. Now let not him that eats meat, despise him who does not.

And let not him who does not eat meat, judge him that does. For God has received him. In other words, you ought to be able to get along.

You don't look down and say, oh, that stupid nut thinks he can't eat meat, you know. Can you believe that? And you sort of despise, no, no. If that's the way he feels, fine, let it go.

But if you think, um, you're eating meat, you know. No, you're not to do that either. If the fellow wants to have a steak, let him have a steak, you know.

And don't condemn him or don't judge him because he's eating meat. Recognize that, you know, we can have differences as far as whether or not a person can eat meat or not meat. It is his own spiritual conscience.

It shouldn't be an issue. But for those who would judge those who are doing something that they don't feel a personal freedom to do, he said, who are you who judges another man's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Yea, he shall be held up for God is able to make him to stand.

In other words, if he were your servant, then you could have something to say about what he ate or didn't eat. But he's not your servant. He's God's servant.

One man esteems one day above another. Another esteems every day alike. And so we're getting now to the seventh day.

One man esteems Saturday. And that's the only, you know, day that you should worship. Escape the Sabbath.

And another man esteems every day alike. Now, he said, let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind. For he that regards the day, regards it to the Lord.

I feel that's the Lord's day. And so I'm regarding it to the Lord. But he that regards not the day, again, he feels that he's serving the Lord.

Every day is alike. I serve the Lord every day. I worship the Lord every day.

I keep every day holy. And so, he that eats, eats to the Lord. For he gives God thanks.

And he that eats not to the Lord, he eats not. And he gives God thanks. I think that I'm, you know, being more righteous or spiritual by not eating meat.

And so, I do that as unto the Lord. Well, I feel I can enjoy meat. And so, I give thanks for it and eat it and enjoy it as unto the Lord, you know.

For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself. And here's the issue. The church at this time was sharply divided between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Because the Jews had one set of convictions, the Gentiles had another set of convictions. Now, the Lord is wanting to break down the walls between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. Wanting them to all feel one in Christ.

For in Christ there's neither Jew nor Greek, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free. Christ is all and in all. And they're wanting to bring the church into a unity.

And so, there are certain things that could hinder the unity. And these are the issues that they are writing to them about. When the church, say, has a dinner together, and it was a very common thing in the early church to have what they called the love feast.

And usually once a week, they would have these love feasts. Now, the love feast was sort of a old type version of potlucks today. Where everybody, you know, just brings some dish and we all sit down and we eat, you know, the special bean dip that someone prepared.

And we, someone else has prepared some casseroles. And we sort of just enjoy the food that others have brought. Well, if you had a situation where you have the Gentiles who are bringing to the dinner meat that had been strangled.

The blood still in it, kept in it by strangulation. If a Jew would eat meat with the blood, he would feel horribly guilty. Because that was definitely a requirement in preparing food in the meat in a kosher fashion, was to thoroughly bleed it so that you don't eat the meat with the blood.

So, we're trying now to bring the church together so that they can fellowship around the table. And so, these suggestions that are being sent are really for that purpose of unifying the church. And so, Paul said, we don't really live to ourselves.

In other words, we're not to take an attitude, well, I have the freedom to do it and if you don't like it, tough, you know. But to be sensitive to another person's convictions. Whether we live, we live unto the Lord.

Whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we're the Lord's. For to this end, Christ both died, rose and revived, that he might be the Lord both of the dead and the living.

So then, every one of us shall give an account of himself to God. And you're not gonna have to give an account for me. And I, thankfully, won't have to give an account for you.

We, each one of us, will give an account of ourselves to the Lord. Paul said, let us not therefore judge one another anymore, but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. For I know, I'm persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself.

But to him that esteems anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if your brother is grieved with your meat, now are you not walking in love? Don't destroy him with your meat or freedom to eat meat, for whom Christ died. I've always enjoyed reading Spurgeon's sermons.

He was a masterful expositor. And I have, of course, all of his sermons and oftentimes just sit down and read his sermons. They are so masterful.

One day I learned that Spurgeon smoked cigars. Now that's unclean. I mean, what smells worse? And I was shocked.

I didn't read any of his sermons for a couple of months. It's just, you know, the difference in the background. I wouldn't smoke a cigar if you gave me a million dollars.

And yet, I guess he enjoyed them. Be careful that we don't use our liberty in Christ to stumble someone else who doesn't feel that same freedom and liberty that you might feel. So the first issue that the church suggests to the Gentile believers is that they keep themselves from the pollution of idols or meat that has been offered unto an idol.

Now second is to keep yourself from fornication. The Greek word translated fornication is the word porneus, which is all forms of sexual sins, adultery, and it includes all forms, pornography and all. The Gentile world then was, as it is today, obsessed with sex.

It seems that through the ages, sex has been one of Satan's chief weapons of bringing people into bondage. Christianity brought to the world a whole new concept of sex. It saw the sex drive as something that was created by God for the perpetuation of the human race, that it was to be totally satisfied within the covenant of marriage, and that through this experience in marriage, two people would become one.

It would be the binding, unifying experience that bound a couple together in marriage. And I believe that the two shall become one becomes a visible reality in our children. It used to be when the kids were ornery and acting up, I'd say, take your kids and do something with them.

Kay would say, they're yours too. You know, well, that's true. The two of us are one.

We're a combination in our kids. And part of them are like her and part of them are like me. And part of their genes come from her and part from me.

And the two become one. They're a combination. But any sexual intimacy outside of marriage was sin.

And so the Gentile believers are under this law of adultery or sexual immorality. Then keep yourself from things that have been strangled, meat that's strangled. Again, we're talking about blending the church Jew and Greek.

And for that blending, this was such a kind of a deep feeling thing with the Jews, even to the present day. The buying of meat or eating meat. If you go with a real Orthodox Jew to a regular restaurant, you'll find that he won't order meat because he has no way of knowing whether or not that meat was killed properly.

They have special slaughterhouses for their meat where the rabbi watches the process of killing the animal, making sure that it is thoroughly bled. And then he puts his stamp upon it. And it then means it is kosher.

It has been bled properly according to the whole ritual that they have. And the Jews then can eat that meat. But you'll find that you can go to one of the finest restaurants in Jerusalem and you can enjoy a great dinner, say, of prime rib.

And they'll have great bread, hot bread out of the oven. But they'll serve it with oleo. And you say, could I have some butter? And you can create a riot.

Because they won't mix dairy products with meat products in their meals. And it's an interpretation of you're not to see the goat in its mother's milk or boil a goat in its mother's milk. And they carry that to, well, if you drink milk and you're eating shish kebab, you don't know but what the milk came from the goat of the meat.

And it's being seeded in your stomach. But it's a crazy thing. They even won't eat turkey with dairy products.

Now, I've never seen a turkey give milk yet. But they carry it that far. And it's important for them as far as their diet is concerned.

And so we're going to blend the church together, Jews and Gentiles. And oftentimes the Gentiles would strangle the animal to keep the blood in it because they felt that it gave it a better flavor. But the Gentile believers are told that they should keep themselves from meat that was strangled.

And then, of course, sort of going along with the same thing, not to drink blood. And there was, in the scriptures, a very high value placed upon blood because the life of the flesh is in the blood. And so the same reasoning, of course, goes here.

Blood is probably one of the most unwholesome thing that a person can drink. But I've never had any problem with this particular commandment. I found it very easy to keep.

Now, this series of rules were sent to the Gentile church. And they didn't need to give these rules to the Jewish believers. Because it says in Moses, from olden times has in every city those that preach him being read in the synagogue every Sabbath day.

The Jews would already know these things. They go to synagogue every Sabbath. They hear the law being read.

But the Jews were still bound by the ceremonial laws of Moses. And today, there are many what they call messianic fellowships, where those within the messianic fellowship do endeavor to keep the traditions, the ceremonial laws. They endeavor to keep kosher.

They light the candles on the Sabbath day. They endeavor to keep the decrees of the law. They have not yet found that we have become free from the law for righteousness through Jesus Christ.

And there are many Christians who have sought to place themselves under the law, especially the law of the Sabbath day. Now, if you say are keeping the Sabbath day according to the law, if you feel that you're keeping the Sabbath day, makes you more righteous than your Christian neighbor who goes to church on

Sunday, and you feel a spiritual superiority and more righteous because you go to church on Saturday, then you have fallen from grace. Because you are looking at your observance and keeping the law as a basis for your righteousness.

And if righteousness could come by keeping the law, then Christ died in vain. So, it all depends on, if you want to worship on Saturday, fine. But you shouldn't judge the person that worships on Sunday, nor should he condemn you because you worship on Saturday.

But worshiping on Saturday doesn't make you any more spiritual, it doesn't make you any more righteous than worshiping on Sunday, or Monday, or Friday, or whatever day. And so, that's what you have to watch. Is my righteousness predicated upon certain rituals that I perform and that I do? Or is my righteousness predicated upon my putting my faith and trust fully and completely in Jesus Christ, who is my righteousness? Paul, when writing to the Philippians, talking about all of the things that he had that were pluses as far as the righteousness of the law, concluding with the statement, concerning the righteousness which is of the law, I was blameless.

Very few people could say that. But yet, having said that, he then said that those things which were gained to me, keeping of the law, being circumcised, the Hebrew of the Hebrews, Pharisee, and so forth, those things which were once gained to me, I counted loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ, for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but done, that I might know Him and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is of the law, but the righteousness which is of Christ through faith. My righteous standing is not dependent on something as weak and vacillating as me.

My righteous standing before God is forever established in and through my faith in Jesus Christ. He is my peace, and He is my righteousness. Now we read that when James made this, gave his sentence, this is what we should do.

It pleased the apostles, the elders, and the whole church. A split was avoided. The division has been healed.

Everyone is pleased. That's wonderful. I believe that James was exercising the gift of the word of wisdom of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians chapter 12.

The fact that it had this effect, that everyone was satisfied. The division is healed. The church split is avoided.

When divisions do come in the church, it's tragic that we can't gather, pray over the issues, get the mind of the Spirit, because the effect of that is always peace. The healing of the divisions. But as Paul said, ultimately, the kingdom of God isn't meat or drink.

That's not what involves the real kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. And so it's not to be, you know, in the things of eating, not eating, drinking, not drinking.

It's in the things of the Spirit, righteousness, peace, joy. Those are the real issues. Joy in the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the things that we can learn as we study the early church. Things that can be to our benefit.

And Lord, we thank you for the wonderful liberty and freedom that we have in Christ Jesus. As Paul said, all things are lawful for me. But yet, Lord, the check.

We know that all things are not expedient. Things can slow us down. And not everything builds up.

There are things, Lord, that can tear down. And so though they may be lawful, Lord, help us to walk wisely and not become entangled with those things that could tear us down. Or with those things that would just not benefit our progress towards the goal.

Lord, lead us in your paths. May we live to please you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Shall we stand? If you're in need of prayer this evening, there's a lot of prayer power down here at the front. The pastors are down here to minister to you and to pray for you this evening. And so we would encourage you, as we're dismissed, come forward.

Bring your needs, your requests. Lay them out before the Lord. These men will pray with you, agree together in prayer for you, that you might experience the help that God wants to give to you, is longing to give to you, as he wants to manifest his love in so many ways.

And so do make your way forward as soon as we're finished and spend some time in prayer before you go home. I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you. Oh, my soul, rejoice.

Take joy, my King, in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.

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