

IN SEARCH OF ONENESS

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 15:1-35
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In December, my wife and I celebrated 17 years of marriage. It's been a fun journey with plenty of ups and downs. And as much as I thought I was prepared 17 years ago, it has been full of surprises.

One of my favorite verses when I was preparing to get married was the classic one from Genesis 2:24 that the man and the woman would become one flesh. There were lots of aspects of that one flesh relationship that I was eager to experience.

But one of them was simply the idea of being united with another person. The two become one. With the benefit of hindsight, though, I realize that I completely misunderstood that verse. I wouldn't have articulated it at the time, but I'm pretty sure that I thought it meant my wife would become like me.

We were two different people. But once we got married, she would quickly see the logic and reason and sheer superiority of most of my opinions and preferences. She would realize that the way I liked to do life was clearly the best way to do it. So she would kind of merge into me. That's what I thought it meant for the two to become one.

As it turns out, marriage works completely differently. We have remained two very different people. Much to my chagrin, she has not converted to my opinions, preferences, hobbies, and personality. I'm still surprised by the ways in which we are different.

And yet, we've found a different kind of oneness. We've found a unity that doesn't rely on sameness. This one is harder and more complicated than my original idea, and it requires a lot more from me. But, it's better. This kind of oneness is beautiful.

Today we're continuing our series in the book of Acts called "SENT: Living the Mission of the Church." It's been our pattern throughout the series to take detours on important theological topics that arise in the course of Acts.

Last week we heard from a guest speaker, Efrem Smith, who spoke on the subject of race, ethnicity, and reconciliation. His message connected to the passage that we will be studying this morning. Because of some scheduling conflicts, we had the detour before we came across the related passage in Acts.

This morning we'll look at the most theologically important passage in the book of Acts. As the story of Acts has progressed, we have seen an increasing focus on the Gospel being preached to the Gentiles. What began as a Jewish thing, seems to be changing. The Gentiles are believing. The Gentiles are receiving the Holy Spirit. Even the church home base is shifting from Jerusalem to Antioch.

There have been various hints of resistance at each of these turns. But in Acts 15, we reach a climax in which the big conversation about Gentiles takes place. The scene that we will witness this morning is usually described as The Jerusalem Council. The apostles and the elders will all gather in Jerusalem to prayerfully come to a conclusion on the issue of Gentiles putting their faith in Christ.

At root is that same issue that I had to work through in my marriage: How do I become one with someone who is different from me? How do we find oneness that doesn't depend on sameness? This morning we will see the journey that the early church makes in search of oneness.

Oneness is an incredibly important issue for us to understand. So many things work against us experiencing oneness with each other. We live in a culture of individual rights. We think of ourselves as independent and solitary. We drive alone in our cars to sit in our walled-off cubicles to make our individual contributions so that we go home, park in our garages, and disappear into the privacy of our homes.

We are not a communal culture. That mind-set carries into our assumptions about God and his kingdom. We are tempted to think that the Gospel is first about me, and then only as a consequence does it have to do with the other people that also believe in Jesus. But that is a lie.

Last week we heard about the powerful idea that we as the people of God can be reconcilers. This week, we'll see the first community in the book of Acts come to this very same conclusion. We'll watch them wrestle with the issue. We'll see them make a decision. And then we'll learn about how they implement their solution.

The Gospel doesn't only save individuals. When you believe in Jesus, you become part of the people of God. We are all different. The Spirit brings us together in unity. But how do we experience that oneness across ethnic and cultural and political boundaries?

Let's look at Acts 15 to find out.

Acknowledge The Issue

We'll start by seeing how the problem arises in the first place. Paul and Barnabas have just returned from their first missionary journey. They are tired and worn out, but energized by what they have seen God do. In Acts 14:27, we hear that they are specifically excited about how God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."

But their excitement is quickly met with a challenge..

Acts 15:1-6:

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." 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

The issue of division started in Antioch in the church with a large Gentile population. People came from the surrounding Jewish areas with a challenging idea. They claimed that people had to be circumcised first to be saved in Jesus. Because of the issue that it raised, Paul and Barnabas and a few others go up to Jerusalem to get an authoritative ruling on the issue.

People from Judea were pronouncing that the Jews are God's chosen people. Jesus is a Jewish Messiah. You can follow Jesus, but only if you become a Jew first. You have to become a Jew before you can be saved. Remember that salvation didn't just mean "going to heaven when you die." Salvation was about being a part of God's covenant community. It was about as one commentator stated, "receiving in full the benefits provided by God for his people."

This division was an ethnic issue. Jews had felt hostility for Gentiles for centuries. It didn't help that their land—the land that God had given them—was currently occupied and ruled by Gentiles. But as in most cultures, ethnic issues become other kinds of issues as well. This division was a political issue because most Jews and Gentiles thought very differently about the Roman government. It was a socioeconomic issue. It was a cultural issue. It was a class issue.

This situation often happens. Divisions like this are never simple or easily understood. There are many layers, accumulated throughout history and deepened with each painful interaction.

It was a huge deal for the early church to figure out how to bridge this gulf. How were they to understand what God was doing by allowing Gentiles to become people of God? Circumcision was a marker that included everything else about being Jewish. Surely they had to become like the Jews before they could be accepted by God. You must have to be Jewish "to be saved."

Paul and Barnabas knew the answer to this question. They weren't convinced by these ideas. They had seen firsthand what God had been doing. They had seen the Gentiles come to faith. There was no doubt in their minds about whether circumcision was required.

And still, they agree to go to Jerusalem. They aren't being sent out to the world to proclaim the Gospel. They are sent into their community to wrestle with the complicated issue of finding oneness between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas begin by taking this issue seriously. Not for their sake, but for the sake of the church. They recognized the power of divisions to destroy a community and they knew how important it was to get this right. Just like Paul and Barnabas, as we wrestle with issues of unity, we need to start by acknowledging the issue.

Last week during our SENT seminar, we had a panel of people speak about their experiences with their ethnic identity. At one point, Terri Vines, an African-American woman, made a reference to her two sons. She said that race hadn't been a huge issue in her life. But when she had sons, she realized that it is a different thing to be an African-American man than to be an African-American woman.

Our society often views African-American men as threatening and dangerous. Some assumptions need to be taken into account. So even though race wasn't as much of an issue before, now that she had sons, it became an issue that she had to address.

You may think that race and ethnicity isn't an issue around here. You may say that people of all colors and social classes feel equally welcome in our midst. That may be partially true. You may have figured this all out for yourself. You may have strong convictions and healthy diverse relationships and godly attitudes.

But that certainly isn't true for everyone in our area. And it's not even true for all of us in the room. Even if you don't think race is an issue for you, perhaps you need to acknowledge the issue for the sake of others for whom it is an issue.

Sometimes people worry that by acknowledging an issue, you are creating an issue. You're making something out of nothing. I hope you can see that is not the case. When you really listen to another person, there is no way to come to the conclusion that this isn't an issue.

I'll admit that this hasn't been an issue that has affected my experience in a significant way. If I look at my experience, it seems like things are fair to me. A lot of the issues of the past have been addressed, from my vantage point.

But I have come to recognize that there is a particular difficulty for those in the dominant culture to acknowledge the issue. There is a special kind of blindness that makes it hard for people like me to see the issue. As a white male who is educated and economically comfortable, life seems very fair to me. But that isn't really fairness; it's just that my experience has been okay.

That's not to say that my life has been easy. And it's not something for me to feel guilty about. I've had my share of suffering. To say that I'm a part of the dominant culture is not to say that I have no right to the pain that I experience. It is just to say that recognizing the issues of race and ethnicity and culture and social will be harder for me, because I haven't suffered on their account.

But, if I worship Jesus, if I claim to follow a poor Middle Eastern blue-collar Jew, if he is my Messiah, then these things must be an issue for me. I must do my best to see them and to understand and to be sent in search of understanding God's heart. And, to take whatever action God might be calling me to take.

Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to investigate the issue. We can do the same.

Embrace Oneness

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem, the conversation begins regarding the question of the Gentiles. There was a time of open discussion, but then Peter arose to make the first of two major contributions to this issue.

Acts 15:7-11:

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up 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? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Peter makes a brilliant theological case for the inclusion of the Gentiles based on his experience with Cornelius, the Roman centurion. In that encounter, God had directly made it clear that what used to be considered unclean was no longer prohibited. Cornelius had responded to the message of the gospel, and he had seen evidence of the Holy Spirit.

Notice how important it is for Peter to have this personal experience with Cornelius better to understand the Scriptures. We have to encounter people in real life. We have to have real relationships with people who are different from us in order to understand this stuff.

I had the privilege this week of teaching our Seniors Bible study on this topic. Their small group includes Caucasians, Asians, African-Americans, Latinos, and more. It was so encouraging to hear them talk about their experiences with people who were different from them and how they saw God at work in those encounters. It's not just young people who can learn these things.

The goal of Peter's speech is for the Jews to see that the old categories of "us" and "them" abolished through faith in Jesus. To demonstrate, he systematically shatters those distinctions by applying the Jewish language to Gentile believers.

Peter says that God made a choice that the Gentiles should hear the Gospel. In the Old Testament, God made a choice for the nation of Israel.

The Gentiles should "hear and believe." In the Old Testament, the Jews were defined by their "Shema", the Hebrew word for hear. This was the Jewish slogan, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One." And the response to this hearing was always to have faith. "Hear and believe" was what the Jews were supposed to do.

God is called the knower of hearts for the Gentiles, but it was David the king of the Jews who prayed that God would know his heart.

God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, but the Spirit was supposed to be poured out for the Jews.

Peter says that God "made no distinction between us and them." But that's exactly what God said he was doing in the Old Testament. He told Moses in Exodus 8:23 that he would make a distinction between his people and Egypt, and the Jewish Laws focused on making distinctions between clean and unclean.

Paul says that the Gentiles were cleansed by faith. But it was the Jewish Law that was supposed to cleanse God's people Israel.

He urges them not to lay upon the Gentiles the yoke of the Law, reminding them of the words of Jesus who promised a light yoke.

And in his final statement, Paul turns everything on its head, saying that even us—even the Jews—will be saved in the same as the Gentiles: by grace and only by grace through Jesus. The Jews are no longer the standard. It is the Gentiles who are the standard and the Jews are saved in the same way.

Peter is absolutely clear. He systematically extends the full definition of God's people, favored and blessed to the Gentiles. Chosen to hear and believe by the knower of hearts. Given the Holy Spirit without distinction and cleansed by faith to be freed from the yoke of the Law and to set the example of salvation by grace for the Jews themselves.

The Gentiles are not "them." They are "us." In fact, there is no "them." All who believe from any background are included in God's "us." Peter, the Jew of all Jews, argues brilliantly not just that Gentiles are included in the people of God, but that Gentiles actually form the people of God through the grace of Jesus.

Once we acknowledge the issue, this is the kind of radical view of oneness that we must understand and proclaim in our community. Categories and boxes are torn apart. We are not made the same. But we are made one. In following Jesus, we embrace oneness with each other.

It is so hard for us to understand how unthinkable this kind of full acceptance of the Gentiles is. Jew and Gentiles are just categories for us. We understand, but we don't feel the emotional weight.

It might help us to think about what this language would have sounded like in the United States during the middle of the 19th century. Imagine a speech about how African-American slaves are chosen by the knower of hearts and cleansed so that they are the standard by which God judges.

Even Abraham Lincoln, the great emancipator, continued to argue for the superiority of what he called the white race over the black race. Can you imagine the kind of emotion and response language like Peter's would have caused in that context?

This is the kind of radical reversal of position that we have to articulate to embrace oneness. It is not enough to say that “all people are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.” Peter did not simply equalize things. He turned the system upside-down. He made the Gentiles the standard of salvation through Jesus.

We must find ways of turning the classes upside down to say that Jews will be saved in the same way as Gentiles. Ph.Ds and CEOs will be saved in the same way as addicts and the homeless. The rich will be saved in the way as the poor. White Americans will be saved in the same way as immigrant foreigners.

It is not enough to think these things. It is not enough to believe them in your hearts. You may know that you aren't any better than anyone else. You may know that everyone is equal. But if you have some privilege of race or gender or social status or education or profession, you are the one to embrace oneness by articulating these things out loud. Only you can turn the system on its head.

When you do, the incredible power of the Gospel and the boundless love of God is on its fullest display. Embrace the radical oneness of the truth of the Gospel.

Live Together In Jesus

Peter has made his point about the radical equality of Jews and Gentiles. The ideas have been explained. But now James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, stands up to offer a practical suggestion for living this out.

Acts 15:13-21:

After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.”

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 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.”

James begins by echoing some of what Peter, whom he refers to as Simeon, said about the radical inclusion of the Gentiles. He quotes Amos 9 to say that this is not something new. God has been seeking Gentiles to be called by his name from the very beginning. God has been doing this “from of old.”

But then James suggests a practical response to this question. It has become clear that they don't need to become Jews to believe in Jesus. Jesus is for everyone. But what does that mean in a community?

In verse 20, he suggests four specific restrictions. He mentions idols, sexual immorality, food that was strangled, and blood. There's a reference in earlier Jewish writings that reference 3 of these 4 things as activities that absolutely Jews cannot compromise on when they live in a Gentile world. All of these things were associated with festivals and feasts held in conjunction with pagan idol worship. Cult sexual practices, food rituals, and the consumption of blood were all found at these kinds of activities.

Here's what I think James is trying to say: Gentiles don't have to become Jewish to follow Christ. But they can't stay Gentile. It's like the old saying, “you don't have to go home, but you can't stay here.”

Following Jesus changes your life. You have to give up those things that are no longer compatible with your new way of life. You don't just add Jesus to your old life. He changes you.

This action is the one thing that draws us together. When we abandon all those things that we used to identify with, we can cling together for one and only one reason: the person of Jesus. We live together in Jesus.

When I was in India a few years ago on one of our medical and pastoral training trips, I had a fascinating conversation with the son of a Hindu priest. We were holding a medical camp very near his father's temple and he came out to chat with us. We started talking about Jesus and he knew a lot of the Bible. He said he loved Jesus. He said he admired Jesus. He said he worshipped Jesus.

And then it all clicked when he said, “Jesus is one of my favorite gods.” Jesus is one of my favorite gods.

But following Jesus doesn’t work that way. Jesus can’t be *one* of your favorite gods. He has to be your *only* God. When these pagans follow Jesus, they have to set aside their pagan ways. They have to abandon the food of pagan worship, the sexual practices associated with pagan worship, and the whole lifestyle. They don’t have to become Jewish, but they can’t stay pagan.

Often we not only fail to leave those old things, but we start to incorporate them into what it means to be saved. We carry those old identification markers into our new relationship with Jesus.

We start out in faith believing in Jesus. Of course, he is at the center.

But pretty quickly, we start to add a bunch of things to what we think it looks like to be a Christian. Jesus is in the center. When you’re a Christian, you vote like this. You listen to this kind of music. You have this sort of a job. You think this way about all sorts of theological points. You dress and talk and act a certain way, and you make certain decisions about how to educate your kids.

We draw a big circle around these things. We know we’re saved by faith. We don’t say you have to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. But we might think you have to become like me.

It’s like what I thought when I got married. Other people who follow Jesus will indeed eventually start to think the way I do and mirror my preferences and opinions and world view. After all, Christ makes us all one in unity, right?

But it doesn’t work that way. James says that you don’t to become Jewish to follow Jesus, but you can’t stay pagan. You can’t stay Jewish, either. That is no longer the core of your identity. What ends up happening is that your circle has to get smaller.

It doesn’t mean that you don’t vote the way you vote or think the way you think or prefer the kinds of things you prefer; it means those things no longer fall inside the circle of what it really means to “receive in full the benefits provided by God for his people.”

All of these other kinds of things that we end up assuming have to go along with following Jesus start to fall away. The circle gets smaller. When that happens, we’re able to live together in Jesus because he is the only thing that draws us together.

This is what Efrem Smith meant last week when he said that God “kills us softly” day by day. We die to those things that separate us from others. Those things that make practical obstacles and divisions where they ought not to be. All of us from all of our backgrounds turn away from those things and turn to Christ.

We find out that Jesus followers vote differently. They think differently about economics and foreign policy and national security. They run companies, and they work in the mailrooms. They struggle with addiction to methamphetamines and addiction to achievement. They lose their jobs, and they strike it rich. They are depressed and angry and bipolar and schizophrenic and outgoing and withdrawn. They work hard, and they are lazy. They are too judgmental, and they are too lenient on sin. They are white and black and Asian and Latino and indigenous and everything else. They make mistakes by being too cautious and by being too reactionary. You can find Christians in every walk of life from every background struggling with every kind of sin.

What unites us is nothing other than Christ. Christ draws us together. Christ forgives us. Christ unites us.

This is what it looks like to live together in Jesus.

Conclusion

After the council in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas wrote the letter that James suggested. They sent it back to Antioch, and it would eventually make its way to other churches as well.

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. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

The congregation at Antioch received this letter, and they rejoiced. This letter was good news: the Gentiles didn’t have to become Jews. But they did have to change to follow Jesus. This new community could find oneness not centered on ethnicity or politics or socioeconomics, but on Jesus.

The sad reality of history is that this issue of division has plagued the church. The early church accepted Gentiles, but very quickly the church that welcomed Gentiles turned against Jews. In the second century, the early church became deeply anti-Semitic. They remained that way for over a thousand years.

This has always been a difficult issue for the church. Unity amidst difference is one of the most beautiful but one of the most elusive gifts of the Gospel. It is good news. News like this causes rejoicing.

This is the news that we have for the world. The people all around us are in search of oneness—a community of intimacy where they are welcomed for who they are. Oneness that does not demand sameness is good news. That is the Gospel.

Let's acknowledge the issue. Let's embrace that kind of oneness. Let's live together in Jesus. And let's proclaim that Gospel to the world.