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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
Sunday, October 14, 2018

## Acts 15:22-35 (Read vv.22-29) “Christian Responsibilities”

Intro. Last week we saw that the Jerusalem Council concluded that salvation is by grace through faith alone. Salvation is by grace, by God’s gift, so no one can earn or work for his salvation from sin. I hope each of you here today has accepted by faith God’s gift of salvation. But most people seem to have trouble accepting that. They say, “If salvation is not by works, then you have a ‘do nothing’ religion,” or so it would seem. People can’t understand how you get people to be good and work for the Lord if that is not a requirement for salvation. And so religions are set up requiring a person to do this and that to be saved. Some groups like the Mormons and Jehovah’s witnesses are very successful at getting their members to work. However, true Christianity is not a do-nothing religion. Eph. 2:8 says we are saved by grace. Then, two verses later Paul says that we were created in Christ Jesus unto good works. We do not work *in order* to be saved, but *because* we are saved. And because we have been born again, and because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we can do good works that are true pleasing to God.

The second doctrinal truth that they affirmed in Acts 15 has to do with how to live the Christian life. They rejected two ways that are commonly used. The first is the way of legalism. Some would have acknowledged that salvation is by the grace of God, but we attain righteousness and please God through conformity to the Old Testament Law. They wanted Jew and Gentile alike to live under all of the Old Testament Laws, even the rituals and ceremonies of the Law. But Peter said in v.10, “Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” Peter objected to putting us Gentiles under the Law. So instead of giving the converted Gentiles a long list of rules and regulations, they gave them only 4 basic requirements, and entrusted them to the Holy Spirit. But on the other hand, though they did not follow the path of legalism, neither did they give them a license to live any way they wanted either. They recognized that there are limits to the liberty that we have in Christ. Freedom leads to anarchy if it is not matched by a sense of responsibility to God and others. So four requirements or areas of responsibility were given. They were not to follow these requirements to gain or keep their salvation, but to enjoy proper fellowship with God and their fellow Christians. So even though we are not placed under the yoke of the Law, we are nevertheless responsible for our behavior.

Consider with me three areas of responsibility that we have as Christians.

### I. WE HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES TO OTHER CHRISTIANS

Your life is not to be lived in isolation from others. When you become a Christian you become a part of the body of Christ. We are interconnected. So how you live affects other people, whether for good, or for bad. And so you are responsible to others.

Now our main responsibility to other Christians is that of edification. We should build each other up. Obviously that means that:

A. We Must Not Tear Each Other Down - That’s exactly what some from Jerusalem were doing. There are two ways mentioned here that some were tearing down others:

1. Through False Doctrine - The Judaizers had gone out and taught Gentile believers, as stated in v.1, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” I would imagine that at least some of them sincerely thought they were being helpful, but they were actually tearing down the faith of these new Gentile Christians, and disturbing their faith. In fact, the apostles said in v.24, “we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls...” “Unsettling” (*anaskeuazo*) is actually a strong word. It can refer to the act of laying waste by carrying off or destroying everything. Through false doctrine and they were taking away peace and joy from these new believers. They were taking away their assurance of salvation. The Jerusalem church was clear in refusing to be identified with the Judaizers.

We ought to be careful about what we teach. False doctrine can really hurt a church.

2. By Being a Stumbling Block - Since Jewish believers of Jerusalem had been so magnanimous toward the Gentiles, they now suggest that the Gentiles be considerate of long-standing Jewish customs, traditions, and scruples. They said in v.29, “that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.” It seemed necessary for the Gentiles to follow these requirements, not to attain salvation, but to maintain fellowship with the Jewish Christians. At this point the early churches had many Jews. Jews and Gentiles were seeking to worship in the same church, and following these four requirements would preserve the fellowship. It must have been difficult for the Jews to make these concessions. So if the Jewish Christians made an immense concession in waiving the necessity of circumcision, the Gentiles might surely make the concessions stated here. If the Gentiles went ahead and did these things, it would prove to be a serious source of stumbling for the Jews.

Now let’s take a look at each of the first three requirements of v.29 that were very offensive to Jews.

a) “Food sacrificed to idols” parallels “things polluted” by idols in v.20. Thus, the main thrust of this requirement is that Christians would not participate in a feast which involved eating meat from an animal sacrificed to a pagan god. Such a feast would often take place at a pagan temple. The Jews were very sensitive about idolatry, and they did not want any association with it. Yet in Gentile culture idolatry was pervasive. Sacrifices to pagan idols were even a part of Gentile weddings, trade guild meetings, and so forth. Many social events took place at the temple of an idol. Most of the meat sold in the market had come from an idol’s temple. So the Gentile Christians were to avoid any *appearance* of participating in idolatry by abstaining from meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. Now this was an inconvenience, but they were to limit their liberty for the sake of their Jewish brethren, who found such practices especially abhorrent.

b) They were also to “abstain ... from blood.” There were several laws in the Old Testament which strongly prohibited the consumption of blood (Lev. 17:10-14). That was abhorrent to Jews. In some pagan practices, blood was consumed as part of their ritual. Psa. 16:4 says, “Their sorrows shall be multiplied who hasten after another god; their drink offerings of blood I will not offer...” That is still practiced in the occult.

c) The third requirement was to abstain from “things strangled.” Before you eat an animal you have to kill it. One method, especially for smaller animals, was to strangle it. So an animal that is killed by strangulation would not have its blood removed at the time of death. Such meat was not kosher. Eating such meat is another way to violate the Old Testament command against eating blood.

Now let me make a modern application, because these restrictions are not an issue with us today, at least here in America. No small number in this room have eaten bloody meat. Are we in trouble with God? Few of us have relationships with Orthodox Jews who have recently become believers. Now remember, the principle we are to follow is that we are to be considerate of others, and not to do something will cause others to stumble.

Our youth and young adults are growing up in a culture that is a world of difference from the one our senior adults grew up in. Our senior adults grew up in a culture that was largely influenced by Christian morality. Our young adults are growing up in a culture that is post-Christian, much more like Roman society. Yet we have made a commitment to be a multigenerational church. How can we maintain fellowship between the generations? One way is by following the principle of Acts 15. Especially when we are together, we should avoid behaviors that are especially offensive. So suppose we have someone in our church that was recently saved from sin and alcoholism in particular. Their life and their family had almost been ruined by alcohol. They know that they have to totally obtain from it, and that becomes a sensitive area to them. But let's suppose that you have no problem with alcohol. You could make a case from the Bible that there are no Scriptures which *command* total abstinence. Only moderation is *commanded*. So after a round of golf you go into the club house and have a beer. But in walks this new Christian brother. He knows what alcohol can lead to, and so he believes that Christians have no business drinking that stuff, but he sees you drinking it. Your action could lead him to join you in drinking, violate his conscience, and possibly lead him back to drinking heavily. In such a case, you have become a stumbling block to a Christian brother.

What should we do? Paul taught that where no compromise of principle was involved, we should be conciliatory. In his epistles he himself urges that those Christians who are strong in faith should voluntarily restrict their liberty in matters of food and the like, so as not to offend weaker consciences (Rom. 14; I Cor. 8). We should think of others, and not just ourselves. We should be considerate of others. Before we do something or say something, we should stop and think, "Will I hurt my brother in any way by what I say or do?" Peace and unity should be preserved in the Church, and every believer should be willing to refrain from doing anything that might offend weaker Christians, or the religious scruples of other believers. Through love we are willing to limit our liberty.

Let me give another example. We have a lot of senior members of this congregation. They were taught that men should not wear a hat when we gather for worship. Some feel rather strongly about that. Yet there are younger attendees who have from time to time worn a hat in our worship services, and no doubt thought nothing of it. Yet once that young man becomes a Christian and a member of the congregation, he should respect the convictions of the senior members and not wear a hat during worship.

The challenge for our senior members is to refrain from restricting the liberty of our younger generation any more than is necessary. If the Jewish believers could impose no more than four requirements on the Gentile believers, we older adults should limit how much we expect the younger generation to conform to our culture.

We must not only not tear down the faith of others, but:

**B. We Must Build Up Others** - The following four activities will build up and strengthen Christians:

1. By Gathering Together – In v.30 we read, "So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter."

Paul and others brought encouraging words from Jerusalem. Think of the blessing some missed by not being present with the other Christians that day. I do not believe you can be the Christian God wants you to be without faithful, regular church attendance. So often when I visit, people will say to me that their week just isn't right when they miss church for whatever reason. By the way, you should not come to church just to receive a blessing, but to give blessings to others. Some will do so by their Christian service. Others will do so by giving warm greetings, or by giving encouraging words or comfort. You can pray for others in your small group. Just your presence is an encouragement to me.

2. By Teaching God's Word – In v.35 we read, “Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” Teaching the Word of God and learning the Word of God is so important. Paul and Barnabas were the pastor-teachers of the congregation at this time. But notice the word “others” in the last of v.35. It is from the Gk. word *heteros*, which means “others of a different kind.” So these would not be pastors like Paul and Barnabas, but lay teachers.

3. By Exhortation - Not only do we need to teach people the truth, but we also need to appeal to them to do what they have learned. So in v.32 we read, “Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.” I like that phrase, “with many words.” They did not give a brief devotional but a sermon! Paul was a teacher, but Judas and Silas were preachers. They could motivate people to obey God, and serve God.

4. By Love and Acceptance - Notice in v.23 that the Jewish Christians acknowledged the Gentile believers as “brethren” in the Lord. That gave the Gentiles much encouragement and cause for rejoicing (v.31). So here the Jewish believers were showing love and acceptance to the Gentiles. That is amazing in light of the fact that most other Jews despised Gentiles.

A child will grow and prosper in an environment of love and acceptance.

Even so, believers grow strong in environment of Christian love and acceptance. The world is full of rejection, and even bullying. When you come to church you need to experience love and acceptance. Be careful to give such love to others. The cause of Christ has been damaged too much by those who reject other Christians just because they are different in age, ethnicity, or economic status. We need to give heed to the words of the apostle Paul in Rom. 15:7, “Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.”

## II. OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO NON-CHRISTIANS

We can see this responsibility in v.35, “Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” The word translated “preaching” (*euangelizo*) is actually the word for sharing the good news of Christ. So our primary responsibility to non-Christians is sharing the good news of Christ. That is evangelism.

A. Do Nothing to Hinder Evangelism - If Gentile Christians did not follow the 4 requirements, it would especially hinder the efforts of evangelizing the unsaved Jews.

Even so, you should do nothing that hinders evangelism of unbelievers. The way you live as a Christian will either help others come to Christ or hinder people from coming to Christ. So be consistent in your daily walk. One of the greatest hindrances to evangelism is the way so

many professing Christians fail to live the Christian life the way they ought to. Many unsaved people feel they live just as good as most Christians.

B. Do Everything to Help in this Work - Evangelization is not for preachers only. We see this in the fact that in the last of v.35 many “others” (*heteros*) evangelized with Paul and Barnabas also. With the gospel of grace confirmed (vv.30-31), more got involved sharing Christ with others.

It has been a while since we have offered a witness training class. When we offer one, I encourage you to take it. But many of us already know enough to witness for Christ. We just need to do it!

### III. WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD

While we should be concerned with how our actions impact other people, we certainly should be considered with how our actions impact our relationship with God. So I want to focus on two of the responsibilities we have with God. First, we have:

A. A Moral Responsibility – In the last of v.29 Gentile Christians were specifically forbidden to participate in “fornication.” Sexual immorality in ancient Roman society was even worse than it is now, though we are not far from it in some cities. Homosexuality, adultery, prostitution, and premarital sex were common. Their sexual morality was about on the level of a dog! Maybe that is one reason Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs. And so it was probably difficult for these Gentile Christians to completely change their sexual habits, but they must.

Even though we Gentiles are not required to keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, we should keep the moral laws of the Old Testament. Jesus said that He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. The laws concerning the ceremonies and rituals were given to point to the day when the Messiah would come and die for our sins. Jesus fulfilled those ceremonial laws, and so their purpose has been fulfilled. Those laws are no longer needed. But the moral law has not been abolished. Here we see an example of the moral law that we should live by. There were numerous such laws. We indeed have a moral responsibility.

This is backed up by many New Testament Scriptures. I Cor. 6:13 says, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” Two reasons for this are found in vv.19-20, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” I Th. 4:3 says, “It is God’s will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality.”

Oh, how we need a return to morality in this country! There is little morality in Washington. There is little morality in the big cities of our country. There is little morality in our schools. There is little morality in the entertainment industry, as we all know. The Me-Too movement has revealed that even sexual assault has been too widespread in the entertainment industry. There is little morality in big business. But we cannot expect Washington or our culture to clean up their morality until the Church gets right with God! There is too much immorality even in the church! It has become all too common for unmarried professing Christians to cohabit as if they were married. Some are even committing adultery. Perhaps millions of church members are looking at pornography online.

Are you committed to being holy in body, to abstain from sexual immorality? You should. That is a moral responsibility to God that you have as a Christian.

B. A Loving Responsibility – This is not specifically dealt with in this text, but we indeed have a responsibility to love God. Dt. 6:5 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This requirement is so important that Paul wrote in I Cor. 16:22, “If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him.” Don’t let anything diminish your love for God.

How can we love God more? One way is to dwell upon what He has done for us. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love (Him), because He first loved us.”

Now both points are linked together in John 14:15, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” Keep the moral commandments of God. Keep that commandments of God regarding evangelism and discipleship. Fulfill your responsibilities to God.

Conclusion: So are you fulfilling your responsibilities to other believers, to non-Christians, and to God? You can only do this, not by trying harder, but by trusting God to enable you to fulfill your responsibilities. God has provided all the resources you need to live the Christian life. He has given you a new heart, the Holy Spirit, His Holy Word, and the support of a church family. Confess any failures, receive forgiveness, and begin a renewed commitment to fulfill your responsibilities to other Christians, non-believers, and to God.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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