

The 'Common' Gospel

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[0 : 00] So we read two passages this morning, one from Acts 11, one from Acts 15. In the early days of the church, the question that these guys were wrestling with was very basic. What does it mean to be a Christian? And in chapter 10 and now repeated in chapter 11, Peter is wrestling with one of the early controversies related to what does it mean to be a Christian? And in chapter 10 and what he's repeating here in chapter 11, he tells us basically three things just by way of reminder. He says that some people have been saying in the early church that Gentiles, if they really want to be Christians, that's all of us, I think in here, unless you're culturally ethnically Jewish, that you have to obey the Jewish customs, if you want to be called a Christian. And so the second thing he says is, no, God has told me in a vision that we are free from the old ceremonies. And so that means thirdly that Gentiles, anybody who's not ethnically Jewish, can be part of the people of God without obeying any of the Jewish customs. So that's what we learned last week and that's what he repeats in chapter 11.

But chapter 15 is probably something like 10 years later. So there's a huge gap of time and it's the climax of this controversy, which keeps going throughout the whole decade or two of the earliest church. What does it mean to call a Gentile a Christian? Because most of the early Christians were all Jews, the earliest Christians. And so as the Gentiles started, non-Jewish people started to come to faith, they were asking, can these people be part of the people of God? What does that look like? And chapter 15 is a council of the leaders of the worldwide church getting together and trying to determine the answer to that question. Now, you may not have ever heard Acts chapter 15 preached on because a lot of times people don't preach on it very much. It gets skipped a lot of times if you're going through the book of Acts. And that's because it's a theological debate. And whenever you start talking about theological debates, especially on Sunday morning, eyes glaze, cell phones come out, people pretend they're reading their Bible, but they're really reading blogs or something on Facebook. And you take a nap because I heard Tim Keller preach on this sermon recently. And he's been a minister for what, 45 years? And he said it was the first time he's ever preached on this.

And he said, why have I never preached on it before? And he said, because it's a long theological debate with lots of detail and controversy. And for modern people, theological debate is boring, right? It's theological debate. It's tedious. It's a little bit tedious. It's about Jews and Gentiles. And we're pretty far removed from even using that binary as a category today very often.

But you know what? If you're a Christian this morning, and even if you're not one, if you're a Christian, you're a theologian. And if you're not a Christian, you still do theology because theology is simply asking the big questions in life. Who's God? Does he exist? Who am I? How am I to live? That's theology. That's doing theology. And so you all, everybody does theological debate.

[3 : 45] Even people who aren't Christians engage in theological debate because it's answering the big questions in life. And this is a critical theological debate because at the heart of it, what it's getting at is the basic definition. What's the gospel? That's really the question that they're asking is what is Christianity? What's salvation mean? And so what you believe really matters. That's basically the point. Now there are four lessons, I think, from this passage that we'll look at real briefly this morning. The first is that truth is important versus one that's in verses one to three. The second is that the community is critical. That's in verses four to six.

The third is that the gospel is not religion. That's in verses seven to eleven. And then Christianity offers freedom. And that's in verses twenty-two to twenty-nine. Okay? So the truth is important verses one to three. In verse one, there's a group that comes, it says they go down from Judea, but actually in our terms they go up. They go north to Antioch. And they go to Antioch and it's a group of probably guys that were formerly Pharisees that have been converted to Christianity. And they go

up north to Antioch and they start teaching, if you want to be a Christian and you're a Gentile, you got to get circumcised if you're a male. And you got to obey the old Jewish customs. Antioch is like the Esk Valley of the early church. Okay? It's a brand new church plant. They got a new pastor, new elders, new everything. And they're trying to figure things out. And Paul has been on a thousand plus mile missionary journey around Asia Minor today with his turkey. And he's just come back and this is the first church that he planted, Antioch. This is home base. This is his heart, this place. And he comes back and he finds that these people from Judea have come up and are basically preaching a very different message than the one he had preached. This is the battleground over the question, what's the gospel? And this early church is incredibly vulnerable because they don't have their doctrines all worked out yet. And so to deal with the problem in verse 3, what does Paul do? He leaves. He leaves Antioch. This is the battleground. This is where the controversy is happening. And the apostle himself, Paul, he leaves. He actually goes on a 400 mile trip south to

Jerusalem and to meet with the leaders of the world church. Why? Why does he leave the battleground of where the controversy is to deal with it? And that's because the elders at Antioch realized that the most important thing that we can do right now is clearly define our doctrine. In other words, for Paul in the early church, doctrine really mattered. It was really important. Truth, getting a grip on exactly what truth is, was incredibly important to them. And so he leaves the church and even in a vulnerable state to go work this problem out with the worldwide church, the leaders of the worldwide church. You know, this is so anti-modern because we live in a cultural moment where feelings determine reality largely, where what a person feels determines what's true. We live in an individualistic culture. And in individualistic cultures, what matters is how each person feels.

And how each person feels is the way that they come to know what's true in life, what should I do, what's true. And that's why for a lot of modern individualist Westerners, when they approach Christianity and they see all the parts about love and forgiveness, they say, yay, right? But when they see the part about the truth being something completely external to you that's outside of your feelings and emotions that cause you actually to submit, modern people have a tough time with that.

[8 : 03] John is getting at this in 1 John chapter 3. In 1 John chapter 3, he, man, it's so modern. He says, our hearts, in other words, our desires, our feelings, our emotions deceive us. He says, emotions, feelings, desires deceive every single human being, but God is greater than our hearts.

In other words, what he's saying there is you desperately need a truth, a God, a truth that is outside of you, that you can't define the truth based off how you feel, what you desire, your emotions. Truth has to be greater than who you are, or it wouldn't be truth. And so very simply the first point, for Paul, missing out on the truth, well-defined, means possibly missing out on salvation. See that? So look, every single human being, whether you're a Christian or not, and especially if you're a Christian and you grew up in a local church your whole life, especially in our denomination, you really need to be serious about the question, what is true?

What is true is much more important than what church did I grow up in? What's my cultural moment? What is my family believe? What's true? That's the fundamental question that us moderns have to ask. The modern way of approaching that question is to do this, is to say, what works or what do I desire? And then to say, secondly, that is my truth, but that's navigating in the dark. Christianity says something complete opposite. It says, first we have to ask what's true, and then we have to ask, do my desires, feelings, emotions, goals, practices conform and submit to the truth?

C. S. Lewis put it as in his usual genius this way, beautiful quote, if Christianity is false, it is of no importance whatsoever. But if it's true, it's of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is of moderate importance. In other words, the first point, truth was important for the early church. Getting your doctrine right for these guys meant the difference in understanding salvation or not. So that's the first thing. Truth is of infinite importance. Secondly, in verses 4 to 6, we're getting at the question now, how do we find the truth? And the answer in verse 4 to 6 is that the community is essential. The community is essential. How do you guys approach figuring out truth? In other words, how do you approach answering the hard questions in life? Who am I? Does God exist? What am I supposed to do with my life? In verse 5, you'll see that it's not just that the Paul and Galatians cause this party, the troublemakers. In verse 5, they're also in Jerusalem.

They belong to the party of the Pharisees, and they're saying in Jerusalem as well, it's necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and have them keep the law of Moses if they want to be Christians. And very simply, it just says that the apostles and the elders gathered together to consider the matter. So in other words, how did the early church try to figure out what the truth was? What the Holy Spirit wanted them to believe, and it simply says they got together, and they talked about it. The community was fundamental. They got together in a community, and they discussed, and they thought about it. But in verse 28, at the very end of the passage, there's something that gets stated that's pretty audacious, and almost comes across to the reader as incredibly arrogant in a way. I don't know if you called it in verse 28. At the end, when this council comes to its final conclusion, this is how they present their conclusion. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements. Now you see what they're saying? A bunch of old men literally got together in Jerusalem, talked about a problem, and then at the end of that council, they said, here's what the Holy Spirit says. How audacious, right? I mean, they're saying, our council, we're telling you this is what the Holy

[12:40] Spirit is saying. And you know what? What that tells us is that what the New Testament thinks about how to get at the truth, about how to know what the Holy Spirit is saying, right? And it's pretty simple, actually. How does the Holy Spirit speak? By doing what they did, prayerfully looking at the Bible together in communities. How do you interpret the Bible? How do you come to truth?

They didn't say, I'm going to go do it completely in my quiet time, all by myself. That doesn't work, although they're good. You can't, that's not the only way, that's not the primary way to interpret the Bible, to find out the truth, because human beings are biased. Every one of us comes with a cultural package already built in feelings and desires and things we want, and we read every text that we encounter with certain biases, with certain inclinations, and it masks realities. We don't see the whole. And so every person situated in a particular culture, to get at the truth, to get at the fundamental truth has to come together in community. You have to come together and read the text in community to get at it. And that's what we see throughout the entire New Testament, and that's fundamental to what this council tried to do. The most fundamental controversy in the early church, what is the gospel? The only way that they knew to get at it was by coming together and prayerfully reading in communities. So the truth is important. To get at the truth, you've got to come together with other people and get past your own biases to read the text in community. But thirdly, and this is kind of the centerpiece of the passage, what was the truth? What truth did they get at? And the truth that they got at in verse 7 to 11 was that the gospel is not religion. The gospel is not religion. Okay, so let's hone down a little bit on the problem just for a second. This is where the tedious theological debate starts, but we'll try to keep it as not tedious as possible. There's an agreement in verse 9. The circumcision party, these guys that are saying Gentiles have to be circumcised, they have to obey the Old Testament if they want to be Christians, they actually agree on something pretty fundamental with the early church, with the apostles and the elders and all that. And it's in verse 9, and Peter says it in verse 9, God makes no distinction between Gentiles and Jews. He has cleansed their hearts by faith. And the circumcision party completely agreed with that, that God does not any longer after Jesus Christ distinguish between you and Gentiles. Gentiles are part of the people of God. That's what everybody agrees on now. Circumcision party included, that's why they go up north to tell the Gentiles, you got to get circumcised, because they think you are part of the people of God, but this is what you got to do if you want to truly stay, remain part of the community. That's what they agree on. The key question is, but how are the Gentiles members of the people of God? How are they part of the Christian community?

And what they're basically saying when they say they have to be circumcised, circumcision of course is only for males in the Old Testament. And that's shorthand for saying you have to keep the cultural practices of the ceremonial law in Leviticus. So circumcision is a shorthand term for the ceremonial law in Leviticus. And the basic distinction in the ceremonial law is between being clean and unclean. Okay? So every single person in Israel at the time was pronounced, you're clean or you're unclean. And that was a determination made by the priests. And you could be unclean for all sorts of reasons, depending on what you eat, what you drink, how old you are, what time of the month it is, whether you touched a dead animal. If you go out and hunt and kill a stag or something, that may, and you touch the body, that makes you unclean. There's all sorts of ways of being unclean. And so this is basically, we're going to come back to that in a second, but this is, just John Stott summarizes the basic salvation logic of the circumcision party in just three simple steps. Step

one, this is what they're saying, believe in Jesus. Step two, obey the ceremonial law of the Jewish culture. Step three, you will be saved. Okay? That's the gospel of the circumcision party. And in verse 10, Peter says, why are you putting God to the test with this gospel? He says, this is like putting a yoke back on the people that has been removed.

In other words, he's saying, this demand that they obey these ceremonial laws is like tying a net, a rope around the neck of a person and making them pull a lorry. That's the picture he's describing, or an 18-wheeler for our American friends here that have no idea what a lorry is. I had to learn that. It's actually, people can do that if you've ever watched the strongman competitions, funny enough, but that's what he's saying. It's like pulling a tremendous burden that even the Jews aren't able to pull. You see, that's what he's saying. None of us have ever been able to even meet all the requirements of the ceremonial law. And now you're asking the Gentiles to do it as well.

[18:09] It's impossible. And so this is what the council says in reply. This is their determination. It's found in verse 11. We believe instead that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as the Gentiles will. And so John Stott summarizes the council's response of salvation in three little steps as well. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

And then thirdly, now you are able to respond by obeying God's moral law. Okay, you see the difference? So what did the council accomplish? Here's what they accomplished.

They have taught the church at this moment in history that Christianity is unlike all other religions in the entire world because at the center of it is a gospel that is not religion.

Okay, religion. Religion says believe and obey. Religion, in other words, is good advice that says perform, do this. We're going to tell you how to live in order that you may hope beyond hope that you will be accepted before God. The gospel is not advice. The gospel is not telling you to do something. The gospel is a pronouncement of what God has already done. It's news. It's not advice. And that's the fundamental difference between the gospel and religion, between Christianity and every other religion in the world, including the pharisaical obedience to the ceremonial laws.

[19:52] The difference is that in the former in religion, you have to earn your wage to get accepted by God. It's like going to work and getting an income. The gospel says gift, complete and total gift.

It's unlike anything else that's ever been pronounced in all of history. The second thing and final thing that the council helped us, the church, our church today to understand is what's going on with the ceremonial law in the Old Testament. What's up with that?

Okay, if you've read Leviticus at all, you had to have asked that question. What is happening here? Because if you read Leviticus, it's super weird at times. There's some weird stuff in there.

And for modern people, it's incredibly weird, much more weird than it would be for a pre-modern person even. But let me just give you an example. If you touch a dead animal carcass, you are pronounced unclean until the evening of that day or if it's nighttime until the next morning.

Okay, so if you touch a dead animal that you've hunted or something like that, or you want to get for meat, you're unclean until the next day. Now, why? A lot of people say that that clean, unclean distinction is God's way of protecting the early people, the people of God from hygiene issues.

[21:18] So in other words, you go touch a dead carcass, you don't want to spread diseases, right? So you're pronounced unclean for 24 hours or so. But the problem with that is that actually a person who touches a dead carcass, according to the Levitical Law, can go home and kiss their wife and play with their kids.

And none of the rest of the people in the family would be unclean technically, ceremonially, okay? Immediately. So that doesn't, it's not primarily hygiene. That argument doesn't really work.

Why? Because the clean and unclean laws are symbols. They're symbols. In other words, they're sacraments. Now, what's a sacrament? A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality, a visible picture of something you can't see. And so because the Israelites, because of their sin, were separated from God, the point was that at every level of their society, there were constant reminders to them by, and everything they did and what they ate and what they drank and how they lived their lives, that they were unclean spiritually before God, that the only way they could come into the presence of God is by becoming clean again, that they were filthy on the inside. And that was the point. Being unclean in the Old Testament simply means you are spiritually dead and you need to be reminded of it. That's what the ceremonial law was about. And so why is it that the Jerusalem Council doesn't want to uphold this ceremonial law? Why do they want to get rid of it? Because those were shadows. Those were shadows. They're not the real thing. You see, the blood

of bulls and goats going to the temple and sacrificing and becoming clean again, how did you become clean? They had to sprinkle blood on you. It was a dirty mess. You didn't actually become physically clean. You had to get blood all over you to become clean again. That was always just a shadow. It was never the point. And that's what the early, the circumcision party doesn't realize. It was never the point. The point was that that was always pointing to something else, something bigger, something better, something to fulfill it. And you know what that was? I bet you know, it was always about the man of power. The man of power who would come on the, you know, do you know how you would become clean when you went to the sacrifices? You would bring an animal and you would put your hand on the head of that animal, ceremonially, symbolically, transferring by your action, your filth onto the animal's body so that it could then be killed for you.

Ah, substitutionary atonement. You see, this is exactly what Jesus came to do. He came to, so that you could transfer your filth into his body so that he could become the spotless lamb, and become filthy on the cross for you. It was always a shadow. It was always about the greater man of power to come. One of the best illustrations of this reality, and we'll finish this point and then have one brief point, is this, in Luke chapter five, Jesus goes out and he confronts a leper, and a leper, this leper says to him, will you touch my skin and make me clean? And if you touch a leper according to the Levitical law, you would become unclean, ceremonially. And so the disciples say, don't do it. Don't do it, Jesus. You won't be able to go to the synagogue. You'll be unclean.

[25 : 10] And he says, be quiet. I will be clean. And he touches the man. And what happens? The man becomes clean, but Jesus doesn't become filthy. He doesn't, he doesn't become unclean. The man transfers his filth to Christ, but Christ swallows it and kills it. This was a picture of what was to come.

This is exactly what happened on the cross, the great exchange, you for him, him for you. You transfer your filth to him and he swallows it and death so that you get his righteousness.

One last little thing about, why circumcision? Why was circumcision the fundamental sign of the ceremonial law? Because circumcision is a bloody mess. And at circumcision, a cutting takes place. And every single male would be reminded amongst those people that the only way you can have a relationship with God is by something dying, by something being broken, by something being cut, by a bloody mess because you are so removed from God.

You see, Jesus is even the fulfillment of that bloody act of circumcision. So the gospel is not advice, it's not religion, it's a pronouncement of what God has done.

All right, fourthly and very briefly, finally. I had a brilliant illustration at the beginning of this, but I kind of skip it because we were out of time. Sorry, I'll fix it back in later. Verses 22 to 29, Christianity offers freedom. That's one of the main determinations of the Jerusalem Council. Verse 28, verse 28, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements. In other words, we will not lay on you another burden.

[27 : 04] Okay, we'll come to the requirements in just a second. Christianity frees from burdens. It's true freedom. And this is completely contra the monarchy. And it's not a burden. It's a burden.

True freedom. And this is completely contra the modern definition of what it means to be free. In the modern world, what does it mean to be free? It means to have an endless array of choice, an endless buffet of choices. You can be anything you want to be. You can do anything you want to do.

That's the modern notion of freedom. Christianity's idea of freedom is different. It says that true freedom is actually having your choices constrained. In other words, being able to live within the boundaries of the way God has made the world in order that you can flourish.

It's total opposite, ultimate choice, the modern concept of freedom. The modern concept of freedom, by the way, is wholly incompatible with the most fundamental aspect of human society. And that's relationship. Because what is it, what's demanded of you to be in a relationship? Love. And what is it to love? It's to give up your freedoms for the sake of another. If you're married, you know how true that is. You see the modern notion of freedom of liberty is completely incompatible with the most basic aspect of what it means to be in a relationship. That's why it's very difficult to have long-term relationships in the modern world because of our cultural bias that way. But here's the point of the Jerusalem Council on Freedom. The gospel, you are free from the law, from the burden of the law. You do not have to carry a yoke to be justified before God. The gospel is good news. You do not have to work for it. He works for you. That's the gospel. You're free. And then secondly, now you are free and able to live within the boundaries of God's moral order, constrained

by the good boundary of his moral order. You see? The church needs to remember this because even the church throughout history has always been prone to return to Phariseeism. One of the great church fathers in the second century, a guy named Tertullian, he was prone to return to Phariseeism. Just listen to what he says. You hear it in the little phrase, if you want to be a Christian, you have to, or Christians don't do this, right? And adding something to the gospel. And this is what he said. Christians cannot go to the theater because the theater has its origins in pagan worship. The Christian must not dance. And some of you out there are like, that's right. But the Christians must not dance because it might create sexual passion. Christians, this is the best one, must not wear perfume because if God, this is a quote, if God meant for you to smell like a flower, he would have given you a crop of them on your head. There's the logic. No, the Jerusalem Council says, you are freed in Christ. You have liberty of conscience before the gospel. But, and this is very last thing, just two minutes when we're done. But in verse 29, they actually do give the the anti-Achians of requirements. And did you see what some of the requirements were? [30 : 43] No to sexual immorality. That makes sense. That's, that's breaking the moral law, right? We get that one. But they also say, no to food that has been sacrificed to idols. No to eating or drinking blood.

And that was part of the Levitical Law. And no to what has been strangled, also part of the Levitical Law. Sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? That they're coming back on the liberty that they have pronounced in Christ. So what's happening here? Two things I think. One is in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul directly takes up this issue and says, you want to eat food sacrificed to idols, go for it. As long as it doesn't burden your conscience, because food sacrificed to idols, idols don't exist. And so if you know food's been sacrificed to idols, you see that piece of chicken in the marketplace and you want it, you buy it and you eat it. That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8. You're free to do that, right? So why are they putting this boundary back on the anti-Achians? That's the question. And I think it's for two reasons. One, this is a young church. And all of these people in this church have been pagans, not long before this. And they have been sacrificing food to idols their whole life. And that means they cannot handle eating food sacrificed to idols, because it means too much to them. If you're an alcoholic, it's best not to drink alcohol if you freed yourself from that burden, right? But people are free to drink alcohol in Christ. You see, it's the same logic. It's the question of wisdom. It's not wise. Don't drink blood, because that's what the pagans do. And you were a pagan. And for you, it means more than just drinking blood. For you, it's worship. And it always will be, right? And if you struggle with particular types of sins that occur every time you go to particular types of film, stop going. That's the point, you see. But you're free to go to movies. You see, it's the same idea. And then the second reason is this, and this is beautiful, because the Jewish Gentile hostility in that city demanded it. You see, the Jews couldn't handle seeing their brothers and sisters in Christ eat food sacrificed to idols, because the Jews were actually weaker. They couldn't deal with the liberty of the gospel. [33 : 05] So yeah, the people were free to eat food sacrificed to idols, but for the Jews, it crushed their heart when they saw their new brothers and sisters in Christ, the Gentiles doing it. So he's saying, for the sake of love, don't do it, because it constrains your Jewish Gentile relationships. You see, I'll just close with an illustration. When I was in seminary, I was told, don't ever confess your sins in the pulpit. But I'm going to do it right now.

This, I think this one's not too bad. So people shouldn't be upset. When I grew up in Mississippi in the southern US, this was an area deeply affected by the prohibition, the prohibition, the outlawing of all alcohol in the early 20th century. In fact, there are still counties in Mississippi that are dry. In other words, you cannot, it is illegal to have alcohol in particular counties in my state still. And because of that, the church culture I grew up in basically had added something to the gospel. The common pop notion was Christians cannot drink out any alcohol, no matter how moderate, no matter how self-controlled.

And so much so that, of course, we didn't have wine in our communion or anything like that. It's all grape juice, of course. Christians cannot, they do not. You cannot be a Christian and consume even the mildest portion of alcohol, even wine at the Lord's Supper. So that's cultural. That's not biblical. That's not freedom. That's, that's the, Acts 15 says you are free. That is constraining and it's wrong. That's what the Jerusalem Council teaches us. So when I got to the age of 21 and I was legal and I had come to the Presbyterian world and changed my views, I said, I'm going to show them. And so I

went back to an engagement party for some of my best old school friends and all of these guys were still kind of steeped in that, that culture that said Christians cannot, they, you cannot be a Christian and drink. And we went to dinner and I ordered a blue moon, a beer. And just one, and nobody said a word to me at the dinner. And then later that night, one of the wise guy who was also in seminary at the same time as me for a different denomination, he pulled me aside and said, Hey man, you really hurt the people there tonight because you drank that beer. And he said, I understand it, but they do not. They can't, they think they look at you and say, that's outside the bounds of Christianity. And they're wrong, but you crush their hearts.

[35 : 45] And that was a sin. You are free in Christ to eat and to drink, Paul says. But the unity of truth with love means you have to love enough to lose your freedoms. You see, you have to become a slave to others because that's exactly what the cross was. Jesus, the most free man who ever lived, gave up his ultimate freedom to become a slave out of love for us. And so that's the call of Jerusalem Council. Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would bless the word to us in Jesus' name. Amen.